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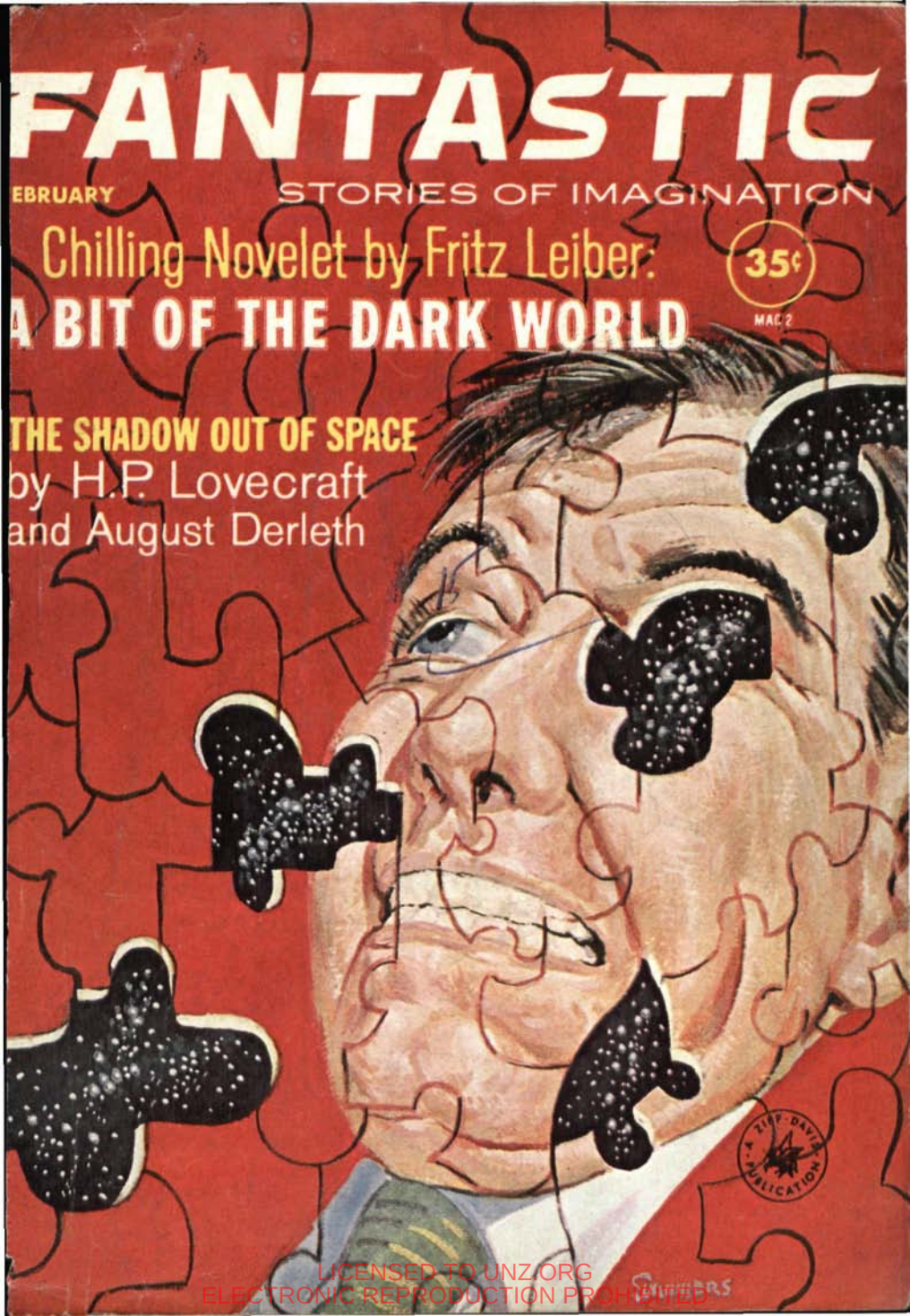

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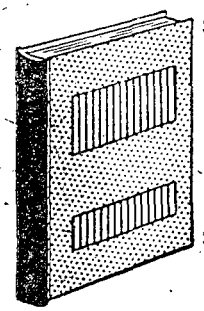

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FEBRUARY 1962
Volume 11 Number 2

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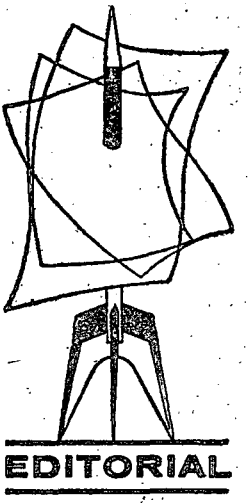

SOME of the more psionically-oriented gentry among us have a tendency to react to any unusual occurrence with a glad Fortean cry of "Lo! Wild Talents!" I am as pre-disposed to welcome any evidence of the various extra-sensory categories as any man; but it does not seem to me that eventual recognition for the seriousness of the claims of esp-er proponents will be helped by shouting wolf at every strange event that seems unexplainable by ordinary standards.

With which preface, let me tell you about two recent incidents. In a Lancashire, England, country pub named the Three Owls Inn, not long ago, queer things were happening with the telephone. During the day it worked normally. But as dusk cast its long shadows over the moors, the instrument would go dead. There was much muttering about ancient curses and unsolved mysteries. But before things got too far out of hand, a telephone mechanic found the cause of the weird happening.

On the shelf above the phone stood a bottle of gin. During the day drops of gin dripped from the bottle as it was used and fell into the phone, striking it dumb. During the night, when the pub closed, the gin evaporated. By morning the phone was in working order again.

ITEM number two was a desperate plea to President Kennedy by a family named Binkowski. Ever since they moved into their modest house in a Schenectady, N.Y., suburb, they had been plagued by eerie noises at all hours of the day and night. Strange vibrations shook the walls, and seemed to pierce their very bodies.

Aha, you say, a poltergeist!

Not so.

Aha, then, you say, because you learn quickly, the gin bottle in the Binkowski household was dripping.

Not so, either.

The answer, it turns out, was that the entire Binkowski family simply had super-acute hearing. They can hear sounds so high-pitched as to be undetectable by human ears. Some members of the family can hear sounds in the 21,000-cycle range—almost twice the range of normal hearing. And, since their house was near three radio transmission towers, electromagnetic radiation deluged it.

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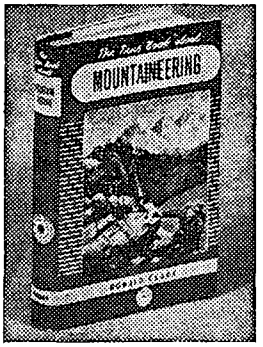

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a bit of the DARK WORLD

By FRITZ LEIBER

Illustrator ADKINS

"I'm betting it will give the readers a spine-tingling scare," Fritz Leiber said to us when he delivered this eerie story of a cosmic horror. "I set myself a challenge," he said. "Is it still possible today to write convincingly the tale of a terror with which science cannot cope?" The decision is yours.

"There was a crack in his head and a little bit of the Dark World came through and pressed him to death."
—Rudyard Kipling in The Phantom Rickshaw

THE antique-seeming dip-nosed black Volks touring car with its driver and two other passengers besides myself was buzzing up a saddle ridge of the Santa Monica Mountains, swinging close past the squat brush-choked peaks with their strange up-jutting worn rocky pinnacles that looked like primeval monoliths or robed and hooded stone monsters.

We were moving with top down and slowly enough to glimpse sharply the occasional little pale lizard skitter or grasshopper whirl up out of our way over the gray crushed stone.

It was a brilliantly clear day

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with compact clouds that emphasized the dizzying inverted depth of the blue sky. Between clouds, the sun was dazzlingly bright. More than once, as we headed straight toward the low-trending distant incandescent orb along a switchback stretch, I was stung by its beams and suffered the penalty of black patches swimming in my vision for a minute.

We had met only two cars and glimpsed only half a dozen houses and cabins since leaving the Pacific Coast Highway—a remarkable loneliness considering that Los Angeles was a scant hour's drive behind us. It was a loneliness that had drawn Viki and myself apart with its silent intimations of mysteries and revelations, but not yet driven us together again (though there was a hint that it would) by reason of its menace.

Franz Kinzman, sitting in front to the left, and his neighbor who had volunteered to do this stretch of the driving (a Mr. Morton or Morgan or Mortenson, I wasn't sure) seemed less affected by the landscape, as one would expect seeing they were both rather more familiar with it than Viki or I. Though it was hard to gauge reactions merely from the attitude of the back of Franz's close-cropped gray head or Mr. M.'s faded brown duck hat pulled low to shade his eyes.

We had just passed that point of the Little Sycamore Canyon road where all the Santa Barbara Islands are visible like an argosy of blue-gray faintly granular clouds floating on the surface of the pale blue Pacific, when I suddenly remarked, for no profound major reason that I was aware of at the time, "I don't suppose it's any longer possible today to write a truly gripping story of supernatural horror—or for that matter to undergo a deeply disturbing experience of supernatural terror."

OH, there were enough minor reasons for the topic of my remark. Viki and I had worked in a couple of cheap monster movies, Franz Kinzman was a distinguished science-fantasy writer as well as a research psychologist, and the three of us had often gabbed about the weird in life and art. Also, there had been the faintest hint of mystery in Franz's invitation to Viki and myself to spend with him the weekend of his return to Rim House after a month in LA. Finally, the abrupt transition from a teeming city to a forbidding expanse of nature always has an eerie sting—as Franz immediately brought up without turning his head.

"I'll tell you the first condition for such an experience or artistic inspiration," he said as

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the Volks entered a cool band of shadow. "You've got to get away from the Hive."

"The Hive?" Viki questioned, understanding very well what he meant, I was sure, but wanting to hear him talk and have him turn his head.

Franz obliged. He has a singularly handsome, thoughtful, *noble* face, hardly of our times, though looking all of his fifty years and with eyes dark-circled ever since the death of his wife and two sons in a jet crash a year ago.

"I mean the City," he said as we buzzed into the sun again. "The human stamping ground, where we've policemen to guard us and psychiatrists to monitor our minds and neighbors to jabber at us and where our ears are so full of the clack of the mass media that it's practically impossible to think or sense or feel deeply anything that's beyond humanity. Today the City, in its figurative sense, covers the whole world and the seas and the airways too and by anticipation the spaceways. I think what you mean, Glenn, is that it's hard to get out of the City even in the wilderness."

Mr. M. honked twice at a blind hairpin turn and put in the next remark. "I don't know about that," he said, hunching determinedly over the wheel, "but I should think you could find all the horror and terror you wanted, Mr. Seabury, without going away from home, though it'd make pretty grim films. I mean the Nazi death camps, brainwashing, sex murders, race riots, stuff like that, not to mention the atom bomb."

"Right," I countered, "but I'm talking about supernatural horror, which is almost the antithesis of even the worst human violence and cruelty. Hauntings, the suspension of scientific law, the intrusion of the unutterly alien, the sense of something listening at the rim of the cosmos or scratching faintly at the other side of the sky."

As I said that, Franz looked around at me sharply with what seemed an expression of sudden excitement and apprehension, but at that moment the sun blinded me again and Viki said, "Doesn't science fiction give you that, Glenn? I mean, horrors from other planets, the extraterrestrial monster?"

"No," I told her, blinking at a fuzzy black globe that crawled across the mountains, "because the monster from Mars or wherever has (at least as visualized by the author) so many extra feet, so many tentacles, so many purple eyes—as real as the cop on the beat. Or if he's a gas, he's a describable gas. The exact sort of goon men will be meeting when the spaceships start travel-

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ing the starways. I'm thinking of something . . . well ghostly utterly weird."

"And it's that thing, Glenn—that ghostly, utterly weird thing—that you believe can't be written about effectively any more, or experienced?" Franz asked me with an odd note of suppressed eagerness, eyeing me keenly although the Volks was traveling a jouncy section. "Why?"

YOU started to sketch the reasons yourself a moment ago," I said. My newest black globe was slipping sideways now, pulsing, starting to fade. "We've become too smart and shrewd and sophisticated to be scared by fantasies. Most especially we've got an army of experts to explain away the supernatural sort of thing the instant it starts to happen. The physicist boys have put matter and energy through the finest sieves—there's no room left in it for mysterious rays and influences, except for the ones they've described and catalogued. The astronomers are keeping tabs on the rim of the cosmos with their giant telescopes. The earth's been pretty thoroughly explored, enough to show there aren't any lost worlds in darkest Africa or Mountains of Madness near the South Pole."

"What about religion?" Viki suggested.

"Most religions," I replied, "steer away from the supernatural today—at least the religions that would attract an intellectual person. They concentrate on brotherhood, social service, moral leadership—or dictatorship!—and fine-drawn reconciliations of theology to the facts of science. They're not really interested in miracles or devils."

"Well, the occult then," Viki persisted. "Psionics."

"Nothing much there either," I asserted. "If you *do* decide to go in for telepathy, ESP hauntings—the supernormal sort of thing—you find that territory has all been staked out by Doctor Rhine, riffling his eternal Zener cards, and a bunch of other parapsychologists who tell you they've got the whole benign spirit world firmly in hand and who are as busy classifying and file-carding as the physicists.

"But worst of all," I went on as Mr. M. slowed the Volks for a potholed uphill stretch, "we've got seventy-seven breeds of certified psychiatrists and psychologists (excuse me, Franz!) all set to explain the least eerie feeling or sense of wonder we get in terms of the workings of our unconscious minds, our everyday human relationships, and our past emotional experiences."

Vicki chuckled throatily and put in, "Supernatural dread almost always turns out to be nothing but childhood miscon-

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ceptions and fears about sex. Mom's the witch with her breasts of mystery and her underground baby-factory, while the dark hot bristly demon dissolves to Dear Old Dad." At that moment the Volks, avoiding another dark spill of gravel, again aimed straight at the sun. I dodged it in part but Viki got it full in the eyes, as I could tell from the odd way she was blinking sideways at the turreted hills a moment later.

EXACTLY," I told her. "The point is, Franz, that these experts *are* experts, all joking aside, and they've divvied up the outer and inner world between them, and if we just start to notice something strange we turn to them at once (either actually or in our imaginations) and they have rational down-to-earth explanations all ready. And because each of the experts knows a *lot* more about his special field than we do, we have to accept their explanations—or else go off our own merry way, knowing in our heart of hearts that we're behaving like stubborn romantic adolescents or out-and-out crackpots."

"The result is," I finished, as the Volks got past the potholes, "that there's no room left in the world for the weird—though plenty for crude, contemptuous, wisecracking, funpoking imitations of it, as shown by the floods of corny monster films and the stacks of monster and madness magazines with their fractionally-educated hip cackling and beatnik jeers."

"Laughing in the dark," Franz said lightly, looking past us back the road, where the thin dust the Volks raised was falling over the cliff toward the thorny dark ravines far below.

"Meaning?" Viki asked.

"People still are afraid," he stated simply, "and of the same things. They've just got more defenses against their fears. They've learned to talk louder and faster and smarter and funnier—*and* with more parroted expert-given authority—to shut them out. Why, I could tell you—" He checked himself. He really did seem intensely excited beneath the calm philosopher's mask. "I can make it clear," he said, "by an analogy."

"Do," Viki urged.

Half turned in his seat, Franz looked straight back at the two of us. A quarter of a mile ahead or so the road, climbing a little again, plunged into a stretch of heavy cloud-shadow. I noted this fact with relief—as I now had no less than three dark fuzzy globes crawling along the horizon and I yearned to be out of the sun. From the way Viki was squinting I could tell she was in the same fix. Mr. M. with his pulled-

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down hat and Franz, faced around, seemed less affected.

Franz said, "Imagine that mankind is just one man—and his family—living in a house in a clearing in the midst of a dark dangerous forest, largely unknown, largely unexplored. While he works and while he rests, while he makes love to his wife or plays with his children, he's always keeping an eye on that forest.

"After a while he becomes prosperous enough to hire guards to watch the forest for him, men trained in scouting and woodcraft—your experts, Glenn. The man comes to depend on them for his safety, he defers to their judgement, he is perfectly willing to admit that each of them knows a little more about one small nearby sector of the forest than he does.

"But what if those guards should all come to him one day and say, 'Look, Master, there really is no forest out there at all, only some farmlands we're cultivating that stretch to the ends of the universe. In fact, there never was a forest out there at all, Master—you imagined all those black trees and choked aisles because you were scared of the witch doctor!

"Would the man believe them? Would he have the faintest justification for believing them? Or would he simply decide that his hired guards, vain of their little skills and scoutings, had developed delusions of omniscience?"

THE cloud-shadow was very close now, just at the top of the slight climb we'd almost finished. Franz Kinzman leaned closer to us against the back of the front seat and there was a hush in his voice as he said, "The dark dangerous forest is still there, my friends. Beyond the space of the astronauts and the astronomers, beyond the dark tangled regions of Freudian and Jungian psychiatry, beyond the dubious psi-realms of Dr. Rhine, beyond the areas policed by the commissars and priests and motivations-research man, far far beyond the mad beat half-hysterical laughter . . . the utterly unknown still *is* and the eerie and ghostly lurk, as much wrapped in mystery as ever."

With an exhilarating chilling and glooming, the Volks rolled into the sharply-edged cloud-shadow. Switching around in his seat Franz began eagerly, intently, rapidly to search the landscape ahead, which seemed suddenly to expand, gain depth, and spring into sharper existence with the screening off of the blinding sun.

Almost at once his gaze fixed on a smoothly ridged gray sto pinnacle that had just come into view on the opposite rim of the

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canyon valley beside us. He slapped Mr. M. on the shoulder and pointed with his other hand at a small parking area, surfaced like the road, on the hillside bulge we were crossing.

Then, as Mr. M. swung the car to a grating stop in the indicated area just on the brink of the drop, Franz raised in his seat and, looking over the windshield, pointed commandingly at the gray pinnacle while lifting his other hand a little, fingers tautly spread, in a gesture enjoining silence.

I looked at the pinnacle. At first I saw nothing but the half dozen rounded merging turrets of gray rock springing out of the brush-covered hilltop. Then it seemed to me that the last of my annoying after-images of the sun —dark, pulsing, fringe-edged— had found lodgement there.

I blinked and swung my eyes a little to make it go away or at least move off—for after all it was nothing but a fading disturbance in my retinas that, purely by chance, momentarily coincided with the pinnacle.

It would not move away. It clung to the pinnacle, a dark translucent pulsing shape, as if held there by some incredible magnetic attraction.

I shivered, I felt all my muscles faintly chill and tighten at this unnatural linkage between the space inside my head and the space outside it, at this weird tie between the sort of figures that one sees in the real world and the kind that swim before the eyes when one closes them in the dark.

I blinked my eyes harder, swung my head from side to side.

It was no use. The shaggy dark shape with the strange lines going out from it clung to the pinnacle like some giant clawed and crouching beast.

AND instead of fading it now began to darken further, even to blacken, the faint lines got a black glitter, the whole thing began horridly to take on a definite appearance and expression, much as the figures we see swimming in the dark become faces or masks or muzzles or forms in response to our veering imagination—though now I felt no ability whatever to change the trend of the shaping of the thing on the pinnacle.

Viki's fingers dug into my arm with painful force. Without realizing it, we'd both stood up in the back of the car and were leaning forward, close to Franz. My own hands gripped the back of the front seat. Only Mr. M. hadn't raised up, though he was staring at the pinnacle too.

Viki began, in a slow rasping strained voice, "Why, it looks like—"

With a sharp jerk of his

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spread-fingered hand Franz commanded her to be silent. Then without taking his eyes away from the crag he dipped in the side pocket of his coat and was next reaching some things back toward us.

I saw, without looking at them directly, that they were blank white cards and stub pencils. Viki and I took them—so did Mr. M.

Franz whispered hoarsely, "Don't say what you see. Write it down. Just your impressions. Now. Quickly. The thing won't last long—I think."

For the next few seconds the four of us looked and scribbled and shivered—at least I know *I* was shuddering at one point, though not for an instant taking my eyes away.

Then, for me, the pinnacle was suddenly bare. I knew that it must have become so for the others too at almost the same instant, from the way their shoulders slumped and the strained sigh Viki gave.

We didn't say a word, just breathed hard for a moment or so, then passed the cards around and read them. Most of the writing or printing had the big sloppiness of something scribbled without looking at the paper, but beyond that there was a visible tremor or shakiness, especially in Viki's notes and my own.

Viki Quinn's:

Black tiger, burning bright. Blinding fur—or vines. Stickiness.

Franz Kinzman's:

Black Empress. Glittering cloak of threads. Visual glue.

Mine (Glenn Seabury's):

Giant Spider. Black lighthouse. The web. The pull on the eyes.

Mr. M, whose writing was firmest:

I don't see anything. Except three people looking at a big bare gray rock as if it were the door to Hell.

And it was Mr. M. who first looked up. We met his gaze. His lips sketched a tentative grin that seemed both sour and uneasy.

HE said after a bit, "Well, you certainly had your young friends pretty well hypnotized, Mr. Kinzman."

Franz asked calmly, "Is that your explanation, Ed—hypnotic suggestion—for what happened, for what we thought happened?"

The other shrugged. "What else?" he asked more cheerfully. "Do you have another explanation, Franz?—something that would account for it not working on me?"

Franz hesitated. I hung on his answer, wild to know if he'd known it was coming, as he'd seemed to, and how he'd known,

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and whether he'd had any comparable previous experiences. The hypnotism notion, though clever, was pure nonsense.

Finally Franz shook his head and said firmly, "No."

Mr. M. shrugged and started the Volks.

None of us wanted to talk. The experience was still with us, pinning us down inside, and then the testimony of the cards was so complete in its way, the parallelisms so exact, the conviction of a shared experience so sure, that there was no great immediate urge to compare notes.

Viki did say to me, in the offhand way of a person checking a point of which he's almost certain, " 'Black lighthouse'—that means the light was black? Rays of darkness?"

"Of course," I told her and then asked in the same way, "Your 'vines,' Viki, your 'threads,' Franz—did they suggest those fine wire figures of curved planes and space you see in mathematical museums? Something linking a center to infinity?"

They both nodded. I said, "Like my web," and that was all the talk for a bit.

I took out a cigarette, remembered, and shoved it back in my top pocket.

Viki said, "Our descriptions . . . vaguely like descriptions of tarot cards . . . none of the actual tarots, though . . ." Her remarks trailed off unanswered.

MR. M. stopped at the top of a narrow drive that led down sharply to a house of which the only visible part was the flat roof, topped with pale jagged gravel. He jumped out.

"Thanks for the lift, Franz," he said. "Remember to call on me—the phone's working again—if you people should need a lift . . . or anything." He looked quickly toward the two of us in the back seat and grinned nervously. "Good-by, Miss Quinn, Mr. Seabury. Don't—" he broke off, said simply, "So long," and walked rapidly down the drive.

Of course we guessed he'd been going to say, "Don't see any more black tigers with eight legs and lady's faces," or something like that.

Franz slid across into the driver's seat. As soon as the Volks got moving I knew one reason the steady competent Mr. M. might have wanted to drive the mountainous stretch. Franz didn't exactly try to make the old Volks behave like a sports car, but his handling of it was in that direction—skittish, a bit dashing.

He mused loudly, "One thing keeps nagging me: why didn't Ed Mortenson see it?—if 'see' is the right word."

So at last I was sure of Mr.

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M.'s name. Mortenson. It seemed a triumph.

Viki said, "I can think of one possible reason, Mr. Kinzman. He isn't going where we're going."

"Imagine one of the awful bird-catching spiders of South America translated into human form, and endowed with intelligence just less than human, and you will have some faint conception of the terror inspired by this appalling effigy."
—M. R. James in
Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

RIM House was about two miles beyond Mr. Mortenson's place and likewise on the downhill (down-cliff, rather!) side of the road. It was reached by a decidedly one-lane drive. On the outside of the drive, edged by white-painted stones, was a near-vertical drop of over one hundred feet. On the inside was a forty-five degree brush-dotted rocky slope between the drive and the road, which was climbing sharply along this stretch.

After about one hundred yards the drive widened to become the short, narrow, jutting plateau or terrace on which stood Rim House, occupying about half of the available space. Franz, who had taken the first part of the drive with confident briskness, slowed the Volks to a crawl as soon as the house came in view so we could scan the outside layout while still somewhat above it.

The house was built to the very edge of the drop, which here plunged down further and even more sharply than it had along the drive. On the uphill side of the house, coming down to within two feet of it, was a dizzily expansive slope of raw earth with hardly a thing growing in it, smoothly geometrical as a little section of the side of a vast brown cone. Along the very top of it a row of short white posts, so distant I couldn't see the cable joining them, marked the road we had left. The slope looked forty-five degrees to me—these things always look impossibly steep—but Franz said it was only thirty—a completely stabilized landslide. It had been burned over a year ago in a brush fire that had almost got the house and still more recently there had been some minor slides started by repairs to the road above, accounting for the slope's unvegetated appearance.

The house was long, one-storey, its walls finished in gray asbestos shingles. The nearly flat roof, also finished in gray asbestos, sloped gently from the cliff side in. Midway the length of the house was a bend, allowing the house to conform to the curving top of the cliff and dividing it

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into two equal sections or angles, to call them that. An unroofed porch, lightly railed (Franz called it "the deck") ran along the nearer angle of the house fronting north and thrusting several feet out over the drop, which as this point was three hundred feet.

On the side of the house toward the drive was a flagstone yard big enough to turn a car in and with a lightly roofed carport up against the house on the side away from the drop. As we drove down onto the yard there was a slight *clank* as we crossed a heavy metal plate bridging a small neat ditch that ran along the foot of the raw earth slope, carrying off the water that would come down it—and also the water that would drain from the roof—during Southern California's infrequent but sometimes severe winter rains.

FRANZ backed the car around before we got out. It required four movements—swing to the corner of the house where the deck started, back with a sharp turn until the rear wheels were almost in the ditch, forward with a reverse turn until the front wheels were at the cliff edge by the metal bridgelet, then back into the carport until the rear of the car was almost up against a door that Franz told us led to the kitchen.

The three of us got out and Franz led us to the center of the flagged yard for another look around before we went inside. I noticed that some of the gray flags were actually solid rock showing through the light soil cover, indicating that the plateau was not an earth terrace cut by men but a rocky flat-surfaced knob thrusting out of the hillside. It gave me a feeling of security which I especially welcomed because there were other impressions—sensations, rather that were distinctly disturbing to me.

They were minor sensations, all of them, barely on the threshhold of awareness. Ordinarily I don't think I'd have noticed them—I don't consider myself a sensitive person—but undoubtedly the strange experience of the thing on the pinnacle had keyed me up. To begin with there was the hint of the nasty smell of burnt linen and with it an odd bitter brassy taste; I don't think I imagined these things, because I noticed Franz wrinkling his nostrils and working his tongue against his teeth. Then there was the feeling of being faintly brushed by threads, cobwebs, or the finest vines, although we were right out in the open and the nearest thing overhead was a cloud a half mile up. And just as I felt that—the faintest feeling, mind you—I noticed Viki lightly

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and questingly run her hand across the top of her hair and down the back of her neck in the common gesture of "feeling for a spider."

All this time we were talking off and on—for one thing Franz was telling us about buying Rim House on quite inexpensive terms five years back from the heir of a wealthy surfing and sports-car enthusiast who had run himself off a turn in Decker Canyon.

Finally there were the sounds that were, I thought, breathing on the verge of audibility in the remarkably complete silence that flowed around us when the Volks' motor was cut off. I know that everyone who goes from the city to the country is troubled by sounds, but these were on the unusual side. There was an occasional whistling too high-pitched for the ear's normal range and a soft rumbling too low for it. But along with these perhaps fancied vibrations, I three times thought I heard the hissing rattle of fine gravel spilling down. Each time I looked quickly toward the slope, but never could catch the faintest sign of earth on the move, although there was admittedly a lot of slope to be scanned.

THE third time I looked up the slope, some clouds had moved aside enough so that the upper rim of the sun peered back down at me. "Like a golden rifleman drawing a bead" was the grotesque figure of speech that sprang to my mind. I looked hurriedly away. I wanted no more black spots before my eyes for the present. Just then Franz led us up on the deck and into Rim House by the front door.

I was afraid that all the unpleasant sensations would intensify as we got inside—especially somehow the burnt-linen smell and the invisible cobwebs—so I was greatly cheered when instead they all vanished instantly, as though faced-down by the strong sense of Franz's genial, sympathetic, wide-ranging, highly civilized personality that the living room exuded.

It was a long room, narrow at first where it had to give space to the kitchen and utility room and a small bathroom at this end of the house, then broadening out to the full width of the building. There was no empty wall-space, it was completely lined with shelves—half of books, half of statuary, archeological odd-ments, scientific instruments, tape recorder, high-fi set and the like. Near the inner wall, beyond the narrow section, were a big desk, some filing cabinets, and a stand with the phone.

There were no windows looking out on the deck. But just beyond the deck, where the bend in the house came, was a big view

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window looking out across the canyon at the craggy hills that completely cut off any sight of the Pacific. Facing the view window and close to it was a long couch backed by a long table.

At the end of the living room a narrow hall led down the middle of the second angle of the house to a door that in turn let out into a most private grassy space that could be used for sunbathing and was just big enough for a badminton court—if anyone felt nervy enough to leap about swatting at the bird on the edge of that great drop.

ON the side of the hall toward the slope was a big bedroom —Franz's—and a large bathroom opening into the hall at the end of the house. On the other side were two only slightly smaller bedrooms, each with a view window that could be completely masked by heavy dark drapes. These rooms had been his boys', he remarked casually, but I noted with relief that there were no momentoes or signs whatever left of youthful occupancy: my closet, in fact, had some women's clothes hanging in the back of it. These two bedrooms, which he assigned to Viki and myself, had a connecting door which could be bolted from both sides, but now stood unbolted but shut —a typical indication, albeit a minor one, of Franz's civilized tactfulness: he did not know, or at least did not presume to guess, the exact relationship between Viki and myself, and so left us to make our own arrangements as we saw fit—without any spoken suggestion that we should do so, of course.

Also, each door to the hall had a serviceable bolt—Franz clearly believed in privacy for guests—and in each room was a little bowl of silver coins, no collector's items, just current American coinage. Viki asked about that and Franz explained deprecatingly, smiling at his own romanticism, that he'd copied the old Spanish California custom of the host providing guests with convenience money in that fashion.

Having been introduced to the house, we unloaded the Volks of our trifling luggage and the provisions Franz had picked up in LA. He sighed faintly at the light film of dust that had accumulated everywhere during his month's absence and Viki insisted that we pitch in with him and do a bit of house-cleaning. Franz agreed without too much demurring. I think all of us were eager to work off the edge of this afternoon's experience and get feeling back in the real world again before we talked about it —I know I was.

Franz proved an easy man to help houseclean—thoughtful for

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his home but not at all fussy or finicky about it. And while wielding broom or mop Viki looked good in her sweater, toreador pants, and highbound sandals—she wears the modern young-female's uniform with style rather than the customary effect of dreary intellectuality mated to a solemnly biologic femaleness.

When we'd done, we sat down in the kitchen with mugs of black coffee—somehow none of us wanted a drink—and listened to Franz's stew simmer.

"You'll want to know," he said without preface, "if I've had any previous eerie experiences up here, if I knew something was apt to happen when I invited you up for the weekend, whether the phenomena—pretentious term, isn't it?—seem to be connected with anything in the past of the region or the house or my own past—or with current activities here, including the scientific-military installations of the missile people—and finally whether I have any overall theory to account for them—such as Ed's suggestion about hypnotism."

Viki nolded. He'd adequately stated what was in our minds.

"About that last, Franz," I said abruptly. "When Mr. Mortenson first made that suggestion, I thought it was completely impossible, but now I'm not quite so sure. I don't mean you'd deliberately hypnotize us, but aren't there kinds of self-hypnosis that can be communicated to others? At any rate, the conditions were favorable for suggestion operating—we'd just been talking about the supernatural, there was the sun and its after-images acting as an attention-capturer, then the sudden transition to shadow, and finally you pointing decisively at that pinnacle as if we all had to see something there."

"I don't believe that for one minute, Glenn," Viki said with conviction.

"Neither do I really," I told her. "After all, the cards indicate we had remarkably similar visions—our descriptions were just different enough to make them fearfully convincing—and I don't see where that material could have been suggested to us during the trip out or at any earlier time when we were together. Still, the idea of some obscure sort of suggestion has crossed my mind. A blend of highway hypnosis and sun-hypnosis, maybe? Franz, what were your earlier experiences? I take it there were some."

HE nodded but then looked at us both thoughtfully and said, "I don't think I should tell you about them in any detail, though. Not because I'm afraid of you being skeptical or any-

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thing like that, but simply because if I do, and then similar things happen to you, you'll be more likely to feel—and rightly—that the power of suggestion may have been at work.

"Still, I ought to answer your questions," he continued. "So here goes, briefly and in a general way. Yes, I had experiences while I was up here alone month before last—some of them like this afternoon's, some of them quite different. They didn't seem to link up with any particular folklore or occult theory or anything else, yet they frightened me so that I went down to LA and had my eyes checked by a very good oculist and had a psychiatrist and a couple of psychologists I trust give me a thorough check-up. They pronounced me fit and unwarped—likewise my eyes. After a month I had myself convinced that everything I'd seen or sensed had been hallucinatory, that I'd simply had a case of nerves, a fit of the horrors, from too much loneliness. I invited you two along partly to avoid restarting the cycle."

"You couldn't have been completely convinced, though," Viki pointed out. "You had those cards and pencils all ready in your pocket."

Franz grinned at the neatly-scored point. "Right," he said, "I was still keeping in mind the offtrail chance and preparing for it. And then when I got in the hills the set of my ideas changed. What had seemed completely inconceivable in LA became once more a borderline possibility. Queer. Come on, let's take a turn on the deck—it'll be cool by now."

We took our mugs along. It was moderately cool, all right, most of the canyon-valley had been in the shadow for at least two hours and a faint breeze flowed upward around our ankles. Once I'd got used to being on the edge of the terrific drop I found it exhilarating. Viki must have too, for she leaned over with deliberately showy daring to peer.

THE floor of the canyon was choked with dark trees and undergrowth. This thinned out going up the opposite face until just across from us there was a magnificent upthrusted and folded stratum of pale tan rock that the canyon wall cut in cross-section and showed us like a geology book. Above this fold was more undergrowth, then a series of tan and gray rocks with dark gullies and caves between them, leading by steps to a high gray summit-crag.

The slope behind the house completely cut off the sun from us, of course, but its yellow rays were still striking the tops of the wall across from us, travel-

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ing up them as the sun sank. The clouds had all blown away east, where a couple were still visible, and none had replaced them.

In spite of being in a much cheerier "normal" mood, I'd braced myself just a bit for the eerie little sensations as we'd come out onto the deck, but they weren't there. Which somehow wasn't quite as reassuring as it ought to have been. I made myself study and admire the variegated rocky wall opposite.

"God, what a view to wake up to every morning!" Viki said enthusiastically. "You can feel the shape of the air and the height of the sky."

"Yes, it's quite a prospect," Franz agreed.

THEN they came, the little ones, faint-footed as before, feather-treading the sensory thresholds—the burnt-linen odor, the bitter brassy tang, the brushing of skyey cobwebs, the vibrations not quite sound, the hissing rattling spill of ghost gravel . . . the minor sensations, as I'd named them to myself . . .

I knew Viki and Franz were getting them too, simply because they said no more and I could sense them both holding very still.

. . . and then one of the last rays of the sun must have struck a mirror-surface in the summit-crag, perhaps an outcropping of quartz, for it struck back at me like a golden rapier, making me blink, and then for an instant the beam was glitteringly black and I thought I saw (though nothing as clearly as I'd seen the black all-knowing spider-centipede on the pinnacle) a black shape—black with the queer churning blackness you see only at night with your eyes closed. The shape coiled rapidly down the crag, into the cavern gullies and around the rocks and finally and utterly into the undergrowth above the fold and disappeared.

Along the way Viki had grabbed my arm at the elbow and Franz had whipped-round to look at us and then looked back.

It was strange. I felt frightened and at the same time eager, on the edge of marvels and mysteries about to be laid bare. And there had been something quite controlled about the behavior of all of us through it. One fantastically trivial point—none of us had spilled any coffee.

We studied the canyon wall above the fold for about two minutes.

Then Franz said, almost gayly, "Time for dinner. Talk afterwards."

I felt deeply grateful for the instant steadying, shielding, anti-hysterical and, yes, comfort-

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ing effect of the house as we went back in. I knew it was an ally.

"When the hard-boiled rationalist came to consult me for the first time, he was in such a state of panic that not only he himself, but I also felt the wind coming over from the side of the lunatic asylum!"

—*Carl Gustav Jung in* Psyche and Symbol.

WE accompanied Franz's stew with chunks of dark pumpernickel and pale brick cheese and followed it with fruit and coffee, then took more coffee to the long couch facing the big view window in the living room. There was a spectral yellow glow in the sky but it faded while we were settling ourselves. Soon the first star to the north glittered faintly—Dubhe perhaps.

"Why is black a frightening color?" Viki put before us.

"Night," Franz said. "Though you'll get an argument as to whether it's a color or absence of color or simply basic sensory field. But is it intrinsically frightening?"

Viki nodded with pursed lips.

I said, "Somehow the phrase 'the black spaces between the stars' has always been an ultimate to me in terror. I can look at the stars without thinking of it, but the phrase gets me."

Viki said, "My ultimate horror is the idea of inky black cracks appearing in things, first in the sidewalk and the sides of houses, then in the furniture and floors and cars and things, finally in the pages of books and people's faces and the blue sky. The cracks are *inky* black—nothing ever shows."

"As if the universe were a gigantic jigsaw puzzle," I suggested.

"A little like that. Or a Byzantine mosaic. Glittering gold and glittering *black*."

Franz said, "Your picture, Viki, suggests that sense of breaking-up we feel in the modern world. Families, nations, classes, other loyalty groups falling apart. Things changing before you get to know them. Death on the installment plan—or decay by jumps. Instantaneous birth. Something out of nothing. Reality replacing science-fiction so fast that you can't tell which is which. Constant sense of *déja vu*—'I was here before—but when, how?' Even the possibility that there's no real continuity between events, just inexplicable gaps. And of course every gap—every crack—means a new perching place for horror."

"It also suggests the fragmentation of knowledge, as somebody called it," I said. "A world too big and complex to grasp in more than patches. Too much

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for one man. Takes teams of experts—and teams of teams. Each expert has his field, his patch, his piece of the jigsaw puzzle, but between any two pieces is a no man's land."

"Right, Glenn," Franz said sharply, "and today I think the three of us have plunged into one of the biggest of those no man's lands." He hesitated then and said with an odd diffidence, almost embarrassment, "You know, we're going to have to start talking sometime about what we saw—we can't let ourselves be gagged by this fear that anything we say will alter the picture of what the others saw and warp their testimony. Well, about the blackness of this thing or figure or manifestation I saw (I called it 'Black Empress,' but Sphinx might have been a better word—there was the suggestion of a long tigerish or serpentine body in the midst of the black fringy sunburst)—but about its blackness, now, that blackness was more than anything else like the glimmering dark the eyes see in the absence of light."

"Right," I said.

"Oh yes," Viki chimed.

THERE was a sense," Franz went on, "that the thing was in my eyes, in my head, but also out there on the horizon, on the pinnacle I mean. That it was somehow both subjective—in my consciousness—and objective—in the material world—or . . ." (He hesitated and lowered his voice) ". . . or existing in some sort of space more fundamental, more primal and less organized than either of those.

"Why shouldn't there be other kinds of space than those we know?" he went on a shade defensively. "Other chambers in the great universal cave? Men have tried to imagine four, five and more spatial dimensions. What's the space inside the atom or the nucleus *feel* like, or the space between the galaxies or beyond any galaxy? Oh, I know the questions I'm asking would be nonsense to most scientists—they're questions that don't make sense operationally or referentially, they'd say—but those same men can't give us the ghost of an answer to even the question of where and how the space of consciousness exists, how a jelly of nerve cells can support the huge flaming worlds of inner reality—they fob us off with the excuse (legitimate in its way) that science is about things that can be measured and pointed at, and who can measure or point at his thoughts? But consciousness *is*—it's the basis we all exist in and start from, it's the basis science starts from, whether or not science can get at it—so it's allowable for me to wonder whether there may not be a primal

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space that's a bridge between consciousness and matter . . . and whether the thing we saw may not exist in such a space."

"Maybe there *are* experts for this sort of thing and we're missing them," Viki said seriously. "Not scientists, but mystics and occultists, some of them at any rate—the genuine few among the crowd of fakers. You've got some of their books in your library. I recognized the titles."

Franz shrugged. "I've never found anything in occult literature that seemed to have a bearing. You know, the occult—very much like stories of supernatural horror—is a sort of game. Most religion too. Believe in the game and accept its rules—or the premises of the story—and you can have the thrills or whatever it is you're after. Accept the spirit world and you can see ghosts and talk to the dear departed. Accept Heaven and you can have the hope of eternal life and the reassurance of an all-powerful god working on your side. Accept Hell and you can have devils and demons, if that's what you want. Accept—if only for story purposes—witchcraft, druidism, shamanism, magic or some modern variant and you can have werewolves, vampires, elementals. Or believe in the influence and power of a grave, an ancient house or monument, a dead religion, an old stone with an inscription on it—and you can have things of the same general sort. But I'm thinking of the kind of horror—and wonder too, perhaps—that lies beyond any game, that's bigger than any game, that's fettered by no rules, conforms to no manmade theology, bows to no charms or protective rituals, that strides the world unseen and strikes without warning where it will, much the same as (though it's of a different order of existence than all of these) lightning or the plague or the enemy atom bomb. The sort of horror that the whole fabric of civilization was designed to protect us from and make us forget. The horror about which all man's learning tells us nothing."

I STOOD up and moved close to the window. There seemed to be quite a few stars now. I tried to make out the big fold of rock in the hillside opposite, but the reflections on the glass got in the way.

"Maybe so," Viki said, "but there are a couple of those books I'd like to look at again. I think they're back of your desk."

"What titles?" Franz asked. "I'll help you find them."

"Meanwhile I'll take a turn on the deck," I said as casually as I could, moving toward the other end of the room. They didn't call after me, but I had the feeling

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they watched me the whole way.

As soon as I'd pushed through the door—which took a definite effort of will—and shoved it to without quite shutting it behind me—which took another—I became aware of two things: that it was much darker than I'd anticipated—the big view window angled away from the deck and there was no other obvious light source except the stars—; two, that I found the darkness reassuring.

The reason for the latter seemed clear enough: the horror I'd glimpsed was associated with the sun, with blinding sunlight. Now I was safe from that—though if someone unseen should have struck a match in front of my face just then, the effect on me would have been extreme.

I moved forward by short steps, feeling in front of me with my hands at the level of the rail.

I knew why I'd come out here I thought. I wanted to test my courage against the thing, whatever it was, illusory or real or something else, inside or outside our minds, or somehow as Franz had suggested, able to move in both regions. But beyond that, I realized now, there was the beginning of a fascination.

My hands touched the rail. I studied the black wall opposite, deliberately looking a little away and then back, as one does to make a faint star or a dim object come clear in the dark. After a bit I could make out the big pale fold and some of the rocks above it, but a couple of minutes' watching convinced me that it was possible endlessly to see dark shapes crossing it.

I looked up at the heavens. There was no Milky Way yet, but there would be soon, the stars were flashing on so brightly and thickly at this smog-free distance from LA. I saw the Pole Star straight above the dark star-silhouetted summit-crag of the hillside across from me, and the Great Bear and Cassiopeia swinging from it. I felt the bigness of the atmosphere, I got a hint of the stupendous distance between me and the stars, and then—as if my vision could go out in all directions at will, piercing solidity as readily as the dark—I got a lasting, growing, wholly absorbing sense of the universe around me.

LYING behind me, a gently swelling, perfectly rounded section of the earth about a hundred miles high masked off the sun. Africa lay under my right foot through the earth's core, India under my left, and it was strange to think of the compressed incandescent stuff that lay between us under earth's cool mantle—blindingly glowing plastic metal or ore in a space where there were no eyes to see and no

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millionth of a free inch in which all that dazzling locked-up light could travel. I sensed the tortured ice of the frigid poles, the squeezed water in the deep seas, the fingers of mounting lava, the raw earth crawling and quivering with an infinitude of questing rootlets and burrowing worms.

Then for moments I felt I looked out glimmeringly through two billion pairs of human eyes, my consciousness running like fuse-fire from mind to mind. For moments more I dimly shared the feelings, the blind pressures and pulls, of a billion trillion motes of microscopic life in the air, in the earth, in the bloodstream of man.

Then my consciousness seemed to move swiftly outward from earth in all directions, like an expanding globe of sentient gas. I passed the dusty dry mote that was Mars. I glimpsed milkily-banded Saturn with its great thin wheels of jumbled jagged rock. I passed frigid Pluto with its bitter nitrogen snows. I thought of how people are like planets—lonely little forts of mind with immense black distances barring them off from each other.

Then the speed of expansion of my consciousness became infinite and my mind was spread thin in the stars of the Milky Way and in the other gauzy star islands beyond it—above, below, to all sides, among the nadir stars as well as those of the zenith—and on the trillion trillion planets of those stars I sensed the infinite variety of self-conscious life—naked, clothed, furred, armor-shelled, and with cells floating free—clawed, handed, tentacled, pinchered, ciliated, fingered by winds or magnetism—loving, hating, striving, despairing, imagining.

For a while it seemed to me that all these beings were joined in a dance that was fiercely joyous, poignantly sensuous, tenderly responsive.

Then the mood darkened and the beings fell apart into a trillion trillion trillion lonely motes locked off forever from each other, sensing only bleak meaninglessness in the cosmos around them, their eyes fixed forward only on universal death.

Simultaneously each dimensionless star seemed to become for me the vast sun it was, beating incandescently on the platform where my body stood and on the house behind it and the beings in it and on my body too, aging them with the glare of a billion desert noons, crumbling them all to dust in one corruscatingly blinding instant.

HANDS gently grasped my shoulders and at the same time Franz's voice said, "Steady,

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Glenn." I held still, though for a moment every nerve cell in me seemed on the verge of triggering, then I let out an uneven breath edged with laughter and turned and said in a voice that sounded to me quite dull, almost drugged, "I got lost in my imagination. For a minute there I seemed to be seeing everything. Where's Viki?"

"Inside leafing through *The Symbolism of the Tarot* and a couple of other books on the arcana of the fortune-telling cards, and grumbling that they don't have indexes. But what's this 'seeing everything,' Glenn?"

Haltingly I tried to tell him about my "vision," not conveying a hundredth of it, I felt. By the time I finished I could see the blur of his face against the black wall of the house barely well enough to tell that he nodded.

"The universe fondling and devouring her children," his brooding comment came out of the dark. "I imagine you've run across in your reading, Glenn, the superficially sterile theory that the whole universe is in some sense alive or at least aware. There are a lot of terms for it in the jargon of metaphysics: cosmotheism, theopantism, panpsychism, panpneumatism—but simply pantheism is the commonest. The idea that the universe is God, though for me God isn't the right term, it's been used to mean too many things. If you insist on a religious approach, perhaps what comes closest is the Greek idea of the Great God Pan, the mysterious nature deity, half animal, that frightened man and woman to panic in lonely places. Incidentally, panpneumatism is the most interesting to me of the obscurer concepts: old Karl von Hartmann's notion that unconscious mind is the basic reality—it comes close to what we were saying inside about the possibility of a more fundamental space linking the inner and outer world and perhaps providing a bridge from anywhere to anywhere."

As he paused I heard a faint spill of gravel, then a second, though I got none of the other minor sensations.

"But whatever we call it," Franz went on, "there's something there, I feel—something less than God but more than the collective mind of man—a force, a power, an influence, a mood of things, a something more than subatomic particles, that is aware and that has grown with the universe and that helps to shape it." He had moved forward now so that I saw his head silhouetted against the thick stars and for a moment there was the grotesque illusion that it was the stars rather than his mouth that was speaking. "I think there are

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such influences, Glenn. Atomic particles alone can't sustain the flaming inner worlds of consciousness, there must be a pull from the future as well as a push from the past to keep us moving through time, there must be a ceiling of mind over life as well as a floor of matter beneath it."

AGAIN, as his voice faded out, I heard the feathery hisses of gravel running—two close together, then two more. I thought uneasily of the slope behind the house.

"And if there are those influences," Franz continued, "I believe that man has grown enough in awareness today to be able to contact them without ritual or formula of belief, if they should chance to move or look this way. I think of them as sleepy tigers, Glenn, that mostly purr and dream and look at us through slitted eyes, but occasionally—perhaps when a man gets a hint of them—open their eyes to the full and stalk in his direction. When a man becomes ripe for them, when he's pondered the possibility of them, and then when he's closed his ears to the protective, mechanically-augmented chatter of humanity, they make themselves known to him."

The spills of gravel, still faint as illusions, were coming now in a rapid rhythm like—it occurred to me at that instant—padding footsteps, each footstep dislodging a little earth. I sensed a faint brief glow overhead.

"For they're the same thing, Glenn, as the horror and wonder I talked about inside, the horror and wonder that lies beyond any game, that strides the world unseen and strikes without warning where it will."

At that instant the silence was ripped by a shrill scream of terror from the flagged yard between the house and the drive. For an instant my muscles were chilled and constricted and there was a gagging pressure in my chest. Then I lunged toward that end of the deck.

Franz darted into the house.

I PLUNGED off the end of the deck, almost fell, twisted to my feet—and stopped, suddenly at a loss for my next move.

Here I couldn't see a thing in the blackness. In stumbling I'd lost my sense of direction—for the moment I didn't know which ways were the slope, the house, and the cliff edge.

I heard Viki—I thought it had to be Viki—gasping and sobbing strainingly, but the direction of *that* wouldn't come clear, except it seemed more ahead of me than behind me.

Then I saw, stretching up before me, a half dozen or so thin

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close-placed stalks of what I can only describe as a more gleaming blackness—it differed from the background as dead black velvet does from dead black felt. They were barely distinguishable yet very real. I followed them up with my eyes as they mounted against the starfields, almost invisible, like black wires, to where they ended—high up—in a bulb of darkness, defined only by the patch of stars it obscured, as tiny as the moon.

The black bulb swayed and there was a corresponding rapid jogging in the crowded black stalks—though if they were free to move at the base I ought to call them legs.

A door opened twenty feet from me and a bram of white light struck across the yard, showing a streak of flagstones and the beginning of the drive.

Franz had come out the kitchen door with a powerful flashlight. My surroundings jumped sideways into place.

The beam swept back along the slope, showing nothing, then forward toward the cliff edge. When it got to the spot where I'd seen the ribbony black legs, it stopped.

There were no stalks, legs or bands of any sort to be seen, but Viki was swaying and struggling there, her dark hair streaming across her face and half obscuring her agonized expression, her elbows tight to her sides, her hands near her shoulders and clawed outward—exactly as though she were gripping and struggling against the vertical bars of a tight cage.

The next instant the tension went out of her, as though whatever she'd been struggling against had vanished. She swayed and began to move in blind tottering steps toward the cliff edge.

That snapped my freeze and I ran toward her, grabbed her wrist as she stepped on the verge, and half-dragged, half-whirled her away from it. She didn't resist. Her movement toward the cliff had been accidental, not suicidal. Franz kept the flashlight on us.

She looked at me, one side of her blanched face twitching, and said, "Glenn."

Franz yelled at us from the kitchen door, "Come on in!"

"But the third Sister, who is also the youngest—! Hush! whisper whilst we talk of her! *Her kingdom is not large, or else no flesh should live; but within that kingdom all power is hers. Her head, turreted like that of Cybele, rises almost beyond the reach of sight. She droops not; and her eyes, rising so high,* might *be hidden by distance. But, being what*

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they are, they cannot be hidden . . . This youngest sister moves with incalculable motions, bounding with tiger's leaps. She carries no key; for, though coming rarely amongst men, she storms all doors at which she is permitted to enter at all. And her name is Mater Tenebrarum, *Our Lady of Darkness."*

—Thomas de Quincy in Suspira de Profundis

AS soon as we got Viki inside she recovered very rapidly from her shock and at once insisted on telling us her story. Her manner was startlingly assured, interested, almost gay, as if some protective door in her mind were already closed against the absolute reality of what had happened.

At one point she even said, "It all still could have been a series of chance little sounds and sights, you know, combined with suggestion working powerfully —like the night I saw a burglar standing against the wall beyond the foot of my bed, saw him so clearly in the dark that I could have described him down to the cut of his mustache and the droop of his left eyelid . . . until the dawn coming on turned him into my roommate's black overcoat with a tan scarf thrown around the hanger and hook."

While she'd been reading, she said, she'd become aware of the ghost-spills of gravel, some of them seeming to rattle faintly against the back wall of the house, and she'd gone out at once through the kitchen to investigate.

Groping her way, moving a few steps beyond the Volks toward the center of the yard, she had looked toward the slope and at once seen moving across it an incredibly tall wispy shape that she described as "a giant harvestman, tall as ten trees. You know harvestmen, some people call them daddy longlegs, those utterly harmless pitifully fragile spiders that are nothing but a tiny brown inanimate-looking ball with eight bendy legs that are like lengths of half-stiffened brown thread."

She'd seen it quite clearly in spite of the darkness, because it was "black with a black shimmer." Once it had vanished completely when a car had turned the bend in the road above and its headlights had feebly swept the air high above the slope (that would have been the faint brief overhead glow I'd sensed)—but when the headlights swung away the giant black glimmering harvestmen had come back at once.

She hadn't been frightened (wonderstruck and terribly curious, rather) until the thing had come treading rapidly toward

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her, its shimmering black legs drawing closer and closer together until before she realized it they were a tight cage around her.

Then, as she discovered they weren't quite as thin and insubstantial as she'd imagined, and as she felt their feathery, almost bristly touch against her back and face and sides, she'd suddenly snapped and given that one terrific scream and started to struggle hysterically. "Spiders drive me wild," she finished lightly, "and then there was the feeling I'd be sucked up the cage to the black brain in the stars—I thought of it as a black brain then, no reason why."

FRANZ didn't say anything for a bit. Then he began, in a rather heavy, halting way, "You know, I don't think I showed much foresight or consideration when I invited you two up here. Quite the opposite, in fact, even if I didn't then believe that . . . Anyway, I don't feel right about it. Look here, you could take the Volks right now . . . or I could drive . . . and—"

"I think I know what you're getting at, Mr. Kinzman, and why," Viki said with a little laugh, standing up, "but I for one have had quite enough excitement for one night. I have no desire to top it off with watching for ghosts in the headlights for the next two hours." She yawned. "I want to hit that luxurious hay you've provided for me, right this minute. Night-night, Franz, Glenn." With no more word she walked down the hall and went in her bedroom, the far one, and closed the door.

Franz said, in a low voice, "I think you know I meant that very seriously, Glenn. It still might be the best thing."

I said, "Viki's got some kind of inner protection built up now. To get her to leave Rim House, we'd have to break it down. That would be rough."

Franz said, "Better rough,

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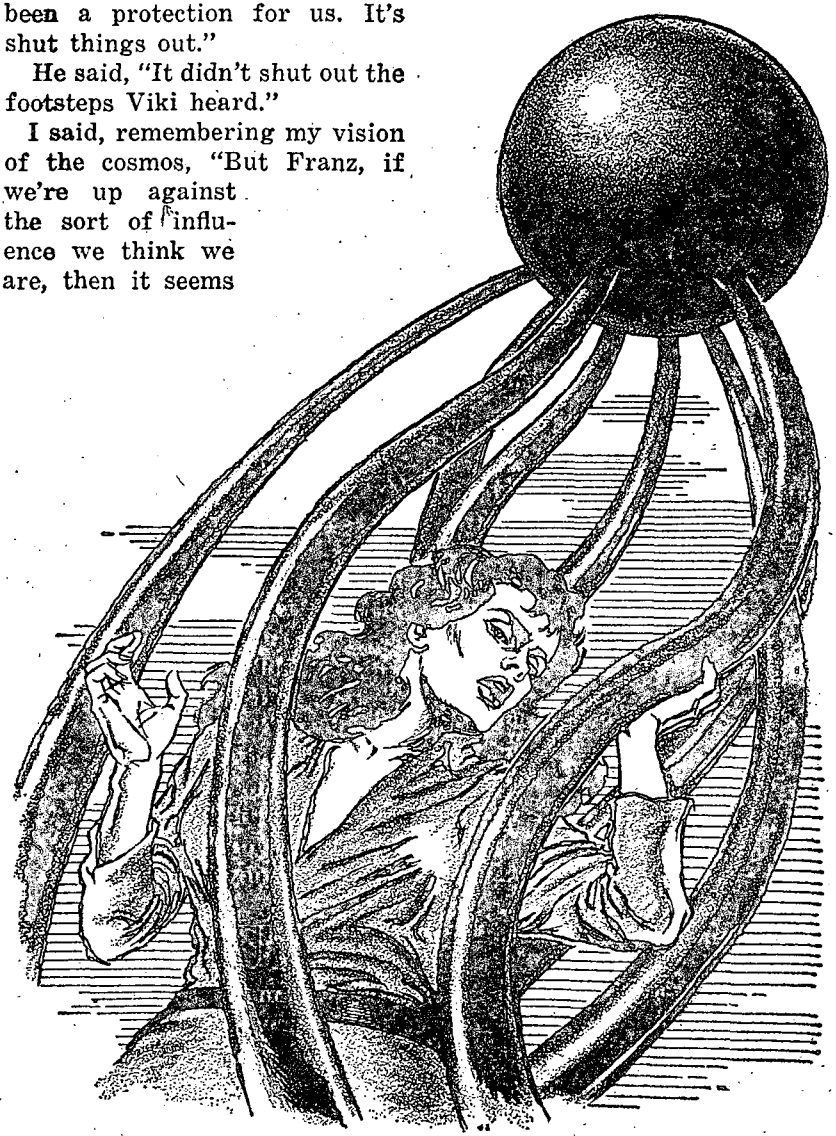
maybe, than what else might happen here tonight."

I said, "So far Rim House has been a protection for us. It's shut things out."

He said, "It didn't shut out the footsteps Viki heard."

I said, remembering my vision of the cosmos, "But Franz, if we're up against the sort of influence we think we are, then it seems



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to me pretty ridiculous to imagine a few miles of distance or a few bright lights making any more difference to its power than the walls of a house."

He shrugged. "We don't know," he said. "Did you see it, Glenn? Holding the light I didn't see anything."

"Just like Viki described it," I assured him and went on to tell my own little tale. "If that was all suggestion," I said, "it was a pretty fancy variety." I squeezed my eyes and yawned; I was suddenly feeling very dull—reaction, I suppose. I finished, "While it was happening, and later while we were listening to Viki, there certainly were times when all I wanted was to be back in the old familiar world with the old familiar hydrogen bomb hanging over my head and all the rest of that stuff."

"But at the same time weren't you fascinated?" Franz demanded." Didn't it make you crazy to know more?—the thought that you were seeing something utterly strange and that here was a chance really to understand the universe—at least to meet its unknown lords?"

"I don't know," I told him wearily. "I suppose so, in a way."

WHAT did the thing really seem like, Glenn?" Franz asked. "What kind of being?—if that's the right word."

"I'm not sure it is," I said. found it difficult to summon th energy to answer his question "Not an animal. Not even an in telligence as we understand i More like the things we saw o the pinnacle and the crag." tried to marshal my fatigu drugged thoughts. "Halfway b tween reality and a symbol," said. "If that means anything.

"But weren't you fascinated? Franz repeated.

"I don't know," I said, pushin to my feet with an effort. "Lool Franz, I'm too beat to be able t do any more thinking now. It' just too hard to talk about thes things. G'night."

"Goodnight, Glenn," he said a I walked to my bedroom. Noth ing more.

Midway getting undressed, i occurred to me that my daze sleepiness might be my mind' defense against having to cop with the unknown, but even tha thought wasn't enough to rous me.

I pulled on my pyjamas an put out the light. Just then th door to Viki's bedroom opene and she stood there, wearing light robe.

I had thought of looking in o her, but had decided that if sh were sleeping it was the bes thing for her and any attempt t check on her might break her in ner protection.

But now I could tell from he

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expression, by the bit of light from her room, that they were shattered.

At the same moment my own inner protection—the false sleepiness—was gone.

Viki closed the door behind her and we moved together and put our arms around each other and stood there. After a while we lay down side by side on the bed under the view window that showed the stars.

Viki and I are lovers, but there wasn't an atom of passion in our embraces now. We were simply two, not so much frightened as completely overawed people, seeking comfort and reassurance in each other's presence.

Not that we could hope to get any security, any protection, from each other—the thing looming above us was too powerful for that—but only a sense of not being alone, of sharing whatever might happen.

THERE wasn't the faintest impulse to seek temporary escape in love-making, as we might have done to shut out a more physical threat, the thing was too weird for that. For once Viki's body was beautiful to me in a completely cold abstract way that had no more to do with desire than the colors in an insect's wing-case or the curve of a tree or the glitter of a snowfield. Yet within this strange form, I knew, was a friend.

We didn't speak a word to each other. There were no easy words for most of our thoughts, sometimes no words at all. Besides, we shrank from making the slightest sound, as two mice would while a cat sniffs past the clump of grass in which they are hiding.

For the sense of a presence looming around and over Rim House was overpoweringly strong. Dipping *into* Rim House now too, for all the minor sensations came drifting down on us like near-impalpable black snowflakes—the dark burnt taste and smell, the fluttering cobwebs, the bat-sounds and the wave-sounds and once again the feathery spills of gravel.

And above and behind them the sense of a black uprearing presence linked to the whole cosmos by the finest black filaments that in no way impeded it . . .

I didn't think of Franz, I hardly thought of the things that had happened today, though now and then I would worry at the edge of a memory . . .

We simply lay there and held still and looked at the stars. Minute after minute. Hour after hour.

At times we must have slept, I know I did, though blacked-out would be a better expression for it, for there was no rest and

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waking was a nightmarish business of slowly becoming aware and dark aches and chills.

After a long while I noticed that I could see the clock in the far corner of the room—because its dial was luminescent, I thought. The hands pointed to three o'clock. I gently turned Viki's face toward it and she nodded that she could see it too.

The stars were what was keeping us sane, I told myself, in a world that might dissolve to dust at the faintest breath from the nearer presence.

It was just after I noticed the clock that the stars began to change color, all of them. First they had a violet tinge, which shifted to blue, then green.

In an unimportant corner of my mind I wondered what fine mist or dust drifting through the air could work that change.

The stars turned to dim yellow, to orange, to dark furnace-red, and then—like the last sparks crawling on a sooty chimney wall above a dead fire—winked out.

I thought crazily of the stars all springing away from earth, moving with such impossible swiftness that their light had shifted beneath the red into invisible ranges.

WE should have been in utter darkness then, but instead we began to see each other and the things around us outlined by the faintest white glimmer. I thought it was the first hint of morning and I suppose Viki did too. We looked together at the clock. It was barely four-thirty. We watched the minute hand edge. Then we looked back at the window. It wasn't ghostly pale, as it would have been with dawn, but—and I could tell that Viki saw this too by the way she gripped my hand—it was a pitch-black square, framed by the white glimmer.

I could think of no natural explanation for the glimmer. It was a little like a whiter paler version of the luminescence of the clock dial. But even more it was like the pictures one imagines in ones eyes in absolute darkness, when one wills the churning white sparks of the retinal field to coalesce into recognizable ghostly forms—it was as if that retinal dark had spilled out of our eyes into the room around us and we were seeing each other and our surroundings not by light but by the power of imagination—which each second increased the sense of miracle that the shimmering scene did not dissolve to churning chaos.

We watched the hand of the clock edge toward five. The thought that it must be getting light outside and that something barred us from seeing that light, finally stirred me to move and

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speak, though the sense of an inhuman inanimate presence was as strong as ever.

"We've got to try and get out of here," I whispered.

Moving across the bedroom like a shimmering ghost, Viki opened the connecting door. The light had been on in her room, I remembered.

There wasn't the faintest glimmer visible through the door. Her bedroom was dead black.

I'd fix that, I thought. I switched on the lamp by the bed.

My room became solid black. I couldn't see even the face of the clock. *Light is darkness now,* I thought. *White is black.*

I switched off the light and the glimmer came back. I went to Viki where she was standing by the door and whispered to her to switch off the light in her room. Then I got dressed, mostly feeling around for my clothes, not trusting the ghostly light that was so much like a scene inside my head trembling on the verge of dissolution.

Viki came back. She was even carrying her little overnight bag. I inwardly approved the poise that action indicated, but I made no effort to take any of my own things. "My room was very cold," Viki said.

We stepped into the hall. I heard a familiar sound: the whir of a telephone dial. I saw a tall silver figure standing in the living room. It was a moment before I realized it was Franz, seen by the glimmer. I heard him say, "Hello, operator. Operator!" We walked to him.

HE looked at us, holding the receiver to his ear. Then he put it down again and said, "Glenn. Viki. I've been trying to phone Ed Mortenson, see if the stars changed there, or anything else. But it doesn't work for me. You try your luck at getting the operator, Glenn."

He dialed once, then handed me the receiver. I heard no ringing, no buzz, but a sound like wind wailing softly. "Hello, operator," I said. There was no response or change, just that wind sound. "Wait," Franz said softly.

It must have been at least five seconds when my own voice came back to me out of the phone, very faintly, half drowned in the lonely wind, like an echo from the end of the universe. "Hello, operator."

My hand shook as I put down the phone. "The radio?" I asked. "The wind sound," he told me, "all over the dial."

"Just the same we've got to try to get out," I said.

"I suppose we should," he said with a faint ambiguous sigh. "I'm ready. Come on."

As I stepped onto the deck after Franz and Viki, I felt the

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intensified sense of a presence. The minor sensations were with us again, but far stronger now: the burnt taste made me gag almost, I wanted to claw at the cobwebs, the impalpable wind moaned and whistled loudly, the ghost-gravel hissed and splashed like the rapids of a river. All in near absolute darkness.

I wanted to run but Franz stepped forward to the barely glimmering rail. I held on to myself.

The faintest glimmer showed a few lines of the rock wall opposite. But from the sky above it was beating a dead inkier blackness—*blacker than black,* I thought—that was eating up the glimmer everywhere, dimming it moment by moment. And with the inkier blackness came a chill that struck into me like ice needles.

"LOOK," Franz said. "It's the sunrise."

"Franz, we've got to get moving," I said.

"In a moment," he answered softly, reaching back his hand. "You go ahead. Start the car. Pull out to the center of the yard. I'll join you there."

Viki took the keys from him. She's driven a Volks. There was still enough glimmer to see by, though I trusted it less than ever. Viki started the car, then forgot and switched on the headlights. They obscured yard and drive with a fan of blackness. She switched them off and pulled to the center of the yard.

I looked back. Although the air was black with the icy sunlight I could still see Franz clearly by the ghost light. He was standing where we'd left him, only leaning forward now, as though eagerly peering.

"Franz!" I called loudly against the weirdly wailing wind and the mounting gravel-roar. "Franz!"

There reared out of the canyon, facing Franz, towering above him, bending toward him a little, a filament-trailing form of shimmering velvet black—not the ghost light, but shimmering darkness itself—that looked like a gigantic hooded cobra, or a hooded madonna, or a vast centipede, or a giant cloaked figure of the cat-headed goddess Bast, or all or none of these.

I saw the silver of Franz's body begin to crumble and churn. In the same moment the dark form dipped down and enfolded him like the silk-gloved fingers of a colossal black hand or the petals of a vast black flower closing.

Feeling like someone who throws the first shovel of earth on coffin of a friend, I croaked to Viki to get going.

There was hardly any glimmer left—not enough to see the drive,

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I thought, as the Volks started up it.

Viki drove fast.

THE sound of the spilling gravel grew louder and louder, drowning out the intangible wind, drowning out our motor. It rose to a thunder. Under the moving wheels, transmitting up through them, I could feel the solid earth shaking.

A bright pit opened ahead of us on the canyon side. For a moment it was as if we were driving through veils of thick smoke, then suddenly Viki was braking, we were turning into the road, and early daylight was almost blinding us.

But Viki didn't stop. We headed up the Little Sycamore Canyon road.

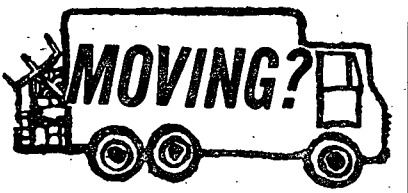
Around us were the turreted hills. The sun hadn't yet climbed above them but the sky was bright.

We looked down the road. No dust clouds obscured it anywhere, though there was dust rising now from the bottom of the canyon-valley.

The slope swept down straight from us to the cliff edge, without a break, without a hummock, without one object thrusting up through. *Everything* had been carried away by the slide.

That was the end of Rim House and Franz Kinsman.

THE END



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FOLDING his wings, Gom speared down into the billowing cumulous froth. Delicious, cool updrafts swept his bronze skin clear of the sun's heat as he plunged through the swirling mist.

Then, almost before he knew it, he was dropping out of the brooding, gray bottom of the cloud. Streaking groundward with dizzying speed now, he watched the surface panorama unfold and flare out.

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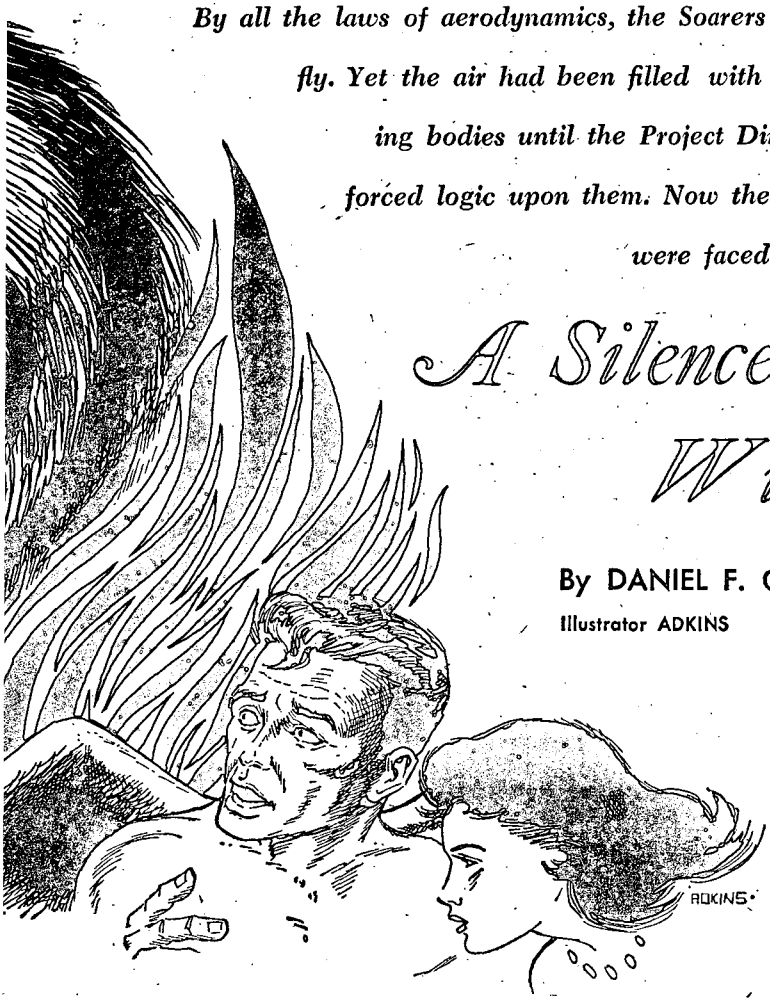
By all the laws of aerodynamics, the Soarers could not fly. Yet the air had been filled with their gliding bodies until the Project Director had forced logic upon them. Now the earthmen were faced with . . .

A Silence of Wings

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

Illustrator ADKINS



Eventually he spread his wings, checking his acceleration, then dipped out of the dive, soaring back up toward the towering cloud with its many pleats and roiling ruffles. At the top of his rise he set his wings to fluttering and hovered beneath the base of the huge anvil formation. There was a primitive alertness in his eyes.

"Edyl?" His voice lost itself between the cloud's vastness and the remoteness of the ground.

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She *must* be nearby. He had seen her darting from the next cloud to this one, determined as always to prove she could elude him in a chase-game.

Then, abruptly—"*Gom.*"

It was the briefest burst of thought. And if he detected a hint of amused, provocative laughter accompanying the unspoken word, it was only because she had opened her mind perhaps not as briefly as she had intended.

He began spiraling down, knowing she was watching. He imparted casualness to his motion, though, trying not to betray his certainty that he was headed in her direction.

It was part of the game.

BELOW sprawled the open plain, green and undulant with the intriguing rhythm of the surface wind. Far westward the majestic littoral mountains, haloed with mist, sloped off into a glimmering emerald sea. Off to the south a curving finger of casala trees spilled out from the forest, their lofty and massive boughs bending under the weight of Soarer houses concealed among the foliage.

Then he saw her—hovering almost motionless above a backdrop of golden pasturage that camouflaged her flaxen body. Only the flutter of her tiny, gossamer wings, scattering the sunlight, had caught his eye.

Gom dropped earthward with a swift, eager determination. And he caught the mental reflection of her laughter, still coquettish, as she darted off toward the forest, purposely losing altitude.

"Edyl!" he shouted, aware that only the thought behind his warning would span the distance. "Not *too* low!"

But even then he knew she would not abandon the incautious maneuver, which was intended only to lure him on. Dismayed, he watched her skim the spiked stalks of the meadow.

His wings flayed the air as he swooped toward her. "Edyl! Get away from that high grass! There might be an—"

But he only choked on the warning. For, at that very moment, a great hulk of furry, fanged evil reared up from concealment in the dense vegetation, stretching to its full height directly in front of the girl.

"Edyl!" he screamed.

The ogobeast drew back a massive paw and swung it in a violent swat that glanced off the girl's shoulder and snapped her head aside. The force of the blow sent her flailing far off her flight path and crashing down into the sea of grass.

Trumpeting its triumph, the animal bounded off to consumate the kill.

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Sick with despair, Gom collapsed his wings and straightened out into a rigid diving attitude. His compact body meeting minimum air resistance, he pitched down at a sharp angle, aiming himself at a spot immediately in front of the loping beast.

Below, he could see Edyl's delicate, vulnerable form, crumpled in the small clearing made by her impact.

GOM hurled out his silent cries of distress, sensing the startled, frightened responses of everyone in his community. Shocked mental reaction came, too, from hundreds of airborne Soarers, from others in settlements spread across all the inhabited lands of his world.

He thrust his wings out to their full span and shuddered violently with the force of wind that threatened to rip the diaphanous organs out of their sockets. Nature had not intended for them to take such stress.

But he managed to pull out of the dive. Spiked stalks brushed his now extended arms and legs as he dipped down in front of the great creature. The maneuver took the animal by surprise and it reared up once more, roaring its excitement over the prospect of two kills instead of one.

Gom eluded the first swat but, in darting sideways, succeeded only in bringing himself within range of the second. Talons creased his thigh, instantly drawing blood.

Still hovering, he retreated, attracting the monster away from the girl. Then he glanced up and saw, hopefully, that the sky was mottled with the convergence of Soarers answering his alarm.

"Aran!" he exclaimed in response to the anxious, questioning thoughts of the nearest rescuer. *"You pick up Edyl! I'll hold this thing off!"*

Just in time, he snatched himself away from another bludgeoning paw.

"Behind you, Gom!" Aran cried. *"There's* another *ogobeast closing in on Edyl! I can't reach her in time!"*

Fear froze Gom's wings in midbeat and he hung there, exposed to the raking claws. But he recovered instantly and winged frantically back toward the clearing where the girl lay unconscious. In close pursuit came the first ogobeast.

Now he could see the other hateful creature bearing down on Edyl from the opposite direction, each bound elevating it to full view above the swaying stalks. If he got to her in time it would be nothing less than a miracle.

He reached the clearing but a moment before the two savage creatures hurled themselves into their final pounces. As he

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dropped to the ground he thanked the Merciful Sky God that the girl had opened her eyes and was beginning to stir. For he would never be able to lift her out of range of the fanged things if she were unconscious.

Gom seized Edyl's arm and jerked her aside as the two great forms collided with thunderous impact above the clearing. While they crashed to earth, he pulled the girl up, wrapped his arms about her waist and pressed his cheek tightly against hers. Thrashing his wings, he kicked away from the ground.

Edyl, too, he saw gratefully, was making a token contribution to lift as they finally pulled out of striking distance of the rearing, clawing beasts.

HALFWAY across the plain, Randolph Saul, director of the Cultural Enlistment expedition, snapped off his telescanner, letting the bulky instrument drop back to his chest. It was still a chest of such proportions as would have been welcomed by a man half his age.

He backed off from the observation port and cupped his hands to shout down into the bowels of the grounded ship, "Howell! Never mind the air car. They worked themselves out of that jam." Then, almost beneath his breath, "We would have been too late anyway."

Beside him, Clark Turner, consultant sociologist, exclaimed, "Damn! That was close."

He gripped the handrail and, relieved, watched other Soarers fluttering around the young couple, who seemed to have shrugged off the aftereffects of their close call. A contingent of flyers broke away and, with childish indifference to the near tragedy now that it had been averted, soared off in single file. The newly organized follow-game soon lost itself in cloud-flecked depths of the sky.

"Weren't you saying something," Turner jibed, "about these people not being technologically inclined because they don't have a hostile environment?"

"Right," Saul insisted. "No natural enemies means no need for weapons. No weapons—no misuse of weapons. In turn, that means no elaborate protective grouping. Without that, no technological civilization. It's been proven that a culture won't get off the ground—if you don't mind an inconsistent metaphor—unless environment is adverse."

Turner drew his slim frame erect and laughed seriously. "I'd call those big cats out there 'adverse'."

"Not at all. What we just saw is a rare occurrence. For people who never need to go on the ground, you can't consider any-

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thing that *doesn't* have wings and can't climb trees as part of the natural environment."

Turner glanced out the observation port again—in time to see an air car rise out of the forest in the distance and float back toward the ship. If the pilot seemed to be flying at snail's pace, it was because he had to. For he carried along an unsolicited convoy of frolicking Soarers. They swarmed around the car in gleeful orbits, like insects buzzing the head of an animal.

Like children, Turner thought. Like elfin children—completely happy, uninhibited, irresponsible.

But that would soon be all in the past. For they were humanoid. And they were intelligent. And if they hadn't lived up to the technological potential expected of their level—well, the rest of the civilized galaxy would damned well see to it that they were whipped into line—for their own good, of course. Responsibilities? They would simply have to learn to shoulder them.

"WHY?" Turner thought, without realizing he had said the word aloud.

"Why what?"

"Why can't we leave them alone?"

Saul swore. "You're not going off on a philosophical jag again? Sometimes I don't like the job either. But it's bread and butter. And if there's going to be galactic progress, then—"

Turner waved off the argument. "I *know* all the reasons. Galactic expansion's clipping along too fast for simple colonization to satisfy the consumptive appetite."

He reached further into recollections of the indoctrination lectures. "If supply and demand are to stay in balance during cosmic explosion, then new cultures have to be enlisted into the production complex."

Unimpressed, Saul started for the passageway, but pulled up short and squinted back. "Snatching a pastoral paradise out from under any culture may not be exactly fun. And loading them down with responsibilities makes you a Grade A stinker. But we both knew what it would be like when we took the job. So we're going to hang on here until we find out why these intelligent humanoids haven't developed a solid, productive culture and correct that fault!"

If there had been a hatch, Turner sensed, the expedition director would have slammed it as he left the compartment.

He turned back to the port. The air car, still being tormented by playful Soarers, was having trouble maneuvering. It reminded him of a mother hen trying to settle down on the nest but

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fearing she might crush the chicks beneath her. Finally the pilot saw an opening and swooped down, landing beside the ship.

Alex Rankin, in charge of the psychological section, climbed out and held the hatch open. Wings fluttered and a lithe, golden form, half Rankin's size, flew into the open. Hesitating, the Soarer hovered over the psychologist, then followed him on toward the main hatch of the ship.

Turner muffled a dry laugh. Rankin had found his willing subject. Now Rankin would happily occupy himself over the next few days sampling every ounce of knowledge, philosophy, understanding, belief that comprised the winged humanoid's personality. It made little difference that the creature would come out of his fourday coma with what would impress him as being the prototype of all splitting headaches.

Turner strained forward to watch the Soarer fly on into the ship on wings that were ridiculously small, incredibly thin, impossibly transparent. Yet, those delicate membranes were adequate to preserve an idyllic way of life and insure security from the—what was it they called the catlike carnivores?—ogobeasts.

"Turner." Saul's voice rumbled from the intercom. "Meet me at the hatch. We're going have another talk with their so-called Wise One."

SECURE in the cradlelike depression between the bole and bough of a great casala tree, Gom sat with his back against bark and with Edyl's head pillowed on his thigh. At intervals, he dipped his hand into a nearby water pocket and moistened the girl's forehead.

"Really, Gom," she protested, smiling up at him. "I'm all right."

She tried to rise, but he held her down with gentle pressure on her shoulder. He couldn't let her risk flying back to the community until he was certain there was nothing wrong with her. Even now three ogobeasts were rustling the underbrush below.

The girl closed her eyes and languished in contentment. Of all the Soarer girls, he assured himself, he had been lucky enough to have had the most beautiful respond to his mating flight.

Her skin was of a soft golden hue and her hair, intensely yellow and always scintillating with the caress of sunlight, reminded him of both the cumulous temples of the Sky God and the dancing sprays of gilt grass. Her face was proudly contoured and finely textured.

She swung her arm gracefully and let her fingers trail along

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the surface of the bark-lined pool. "We must remember this tree, Gom. This cradle is perfect for walling in and thatching over."

He savored the lilting tones of her voice that was both fully vibrant and smooth like the whisper of wind through the leaves. "Say that again."

"Oh, do try to be serious," she scolded. "It may not be too long before we'll *have* to be."

He glanced off into space. It must be like the Ones from the Stars had said. The voices of the Soarers, especially the women, were so beautiful that the race had decided to go on speaking even after they had long ago learned to reach directly from mind to mind. The one called Turner had spoken of a—what was it he had said?—*symphonic* quality. And Gom gathered that the Wingless Ones had painstaking means of making beautiful sounds and mixing them to produce the same sort of effect the Soarers got when they simply spoke.

"The Star Visitors," Edyl said pensively, "—they *are* queer ones, aren't they?"

HE hadn't realized he was allowing some of his thoughts to seep out to her. "Mostly I feel sorry for them. They think the only important thing is to be doing something, making something. They never have time for play. And they have only their voices."

"Only their voices?"

"They can't reach out into each others' minds."

"How dreadful! Oh, Gom—we must remember to be kind to them."

Through an opening in the foliage he watched Soarer after Soarer wing by in a brisk follow-game. The leader flew once around a great bole, heading back in the direction he had come. In turn, each follower repeated the maneuver. Below, two ogobeasts clawed at the trunk of the tree while the forest shook with their bellows of frustrated rage.

Gom tensed in belated comprehension. "Edyl, you said it may not be too long before we'll *have* to be serious!"

She laughed as coyly as though they were still playing the chase-game. "Such behavior is expected of those who must concern themselves with parenthood."

"Edyl!" He started, unable to avoid a reflexing glance at her waist.

She laughed again and bounded up, lighting on the bough and flexing her legs. But before she could take to the air he seized her ankle.

At the moment he wasn't in the mood for play. "Why didn't you tell—"

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But the grave thoughts of Monur, the Wise One, burst in on their privacy. The summons was an anxious one, intended for all the Soarers of the community. And with it came the impression of Star Visitors arriving again at the village in their wingless flying thing.

FLITTING down through the foliage, Gom clung to his mate's hand. Below stretched the cool, shaded sweep of the village. Nestling in each bole-bough cradle as far as he could see were Soarer homes, deceptively frail looking but of adequate strength in a land where the wind never misbehaved.

Near the center of the settlement a swarm of hovering flyers hung auralike around the communal lodge. Their number grew as others converged from all directions in answer to the Wise One's call.

Next to the lodge was the wingless flying thing that had brought the Star Visitors. And Gom marveled over how it could hover there without any fluttering motion at all. Perhaps the two shafts of intense light that shone from its side and touched the great bough had something to do with holding it in place.

Two of the Visitors from the Stars were seated cross-legged on the porch in front of the Wise One. Gom, drawing Edyl down beside him on a nearby branch, noted with interest that one of the guests was Turner. Twice had the man with the blond hair talked to him. And each time it had been a most pleasant experience. Not so with the one called Saul, however. On the one occasion Gom had spoken alone with him, Saul had tried to get him to hold a frightening thing he called—using a word from his own language—a *gun*.

Gom listened to the conversation and shook his head wearily. Saul, in a gruff monotone that made his newly adopted language of the Soarers seem lifeless and harsh, was holding forth on the only subject that ever seemed to interest him.

"But, certainly," he was arguing, "you people want to learn how to make things!"

"We make our houses," Monur answered. "There's nothing else we need."

"You could make *better* houses."

"But there's nothing wrong with these."

"How about *clothes?*"

It was another word Gom hadn't heard before. But he got the idea when Saul called attention to the loose hanging things that covered his arms and legs and body.

The Wise One laughed. "With those we couldn't even fly."

"But they keep you warm!"

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Monur shrugged. "Our only complaint is that occasionally the sun gets too hot."

It was plain that the Star Visitor was becoming impatient.

"But if you start making simple things," he returned in a somewhat stronger voice, "it won't be long before you'll be making the more complicated ones—like that air *car*."

At least, Gom had learned what the Visitors called their lifeless flyers.

"We don't need those," Monur said proudly. "We can fly."

"But that's not the point! Civilized people don't make things just to use for themselves. Maybe you'll find you can turn out better cars than the people on any other world. They'll want your cars. You'll *trade* them for something they can make and you can't."

The Wise One thought it over. "Like what?"

"Why—like *weapons*." Saul stood up and patted the gun that hung at his side. "Weapons to kill ogobeasts—to fight with if any other Soarers try to take your village."

UPRIGHT, the Star Visitors were of an impressive size, Gom noted. Saul, for instance, towered over the other Soarers who were standing nearby—just as the latter, in turn, towered over their children.

"There is no need to kill ogobeasts." Monur spread his hands. "And I can't think of any reason why other Soarers would want this village."

Saul opened his mouth, gulped and closed it again without saying anything.

Three male Soarers swooped down into the village, one burdened with an armload of fruit and the other two each carrying a pair of lifeless birds. They dropped the offerings off at the communal feeding lodge where several of the women, having lost interest in the Visitors, were ready to pluck and treat the game.

Edyl squeezed Gom's hand and nodded toward the one called Turner, who was looking their way and had recognized them. Gom smiled back and the Visitor closed and reopened one of his eyes rapidly. It was a warmhearted gesture, Gom had learned, that conveyed both friendship and reassurance.

Saul, meanwhile, had fallen into deep, troubled thought. And Gom wished there was something he could do to help the man out of his difficulty, whatever it might be.

TURNER brought his after-dinner coffee up to the observation compartment that night and pulled up a chair before the show windowlike port. He

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dimmed the lights and his own reflection in the transparent surface was replaced by a magnificent span of stellar brilliance that splashed across the sky like an elaborate tiara.

Although he recognized none of the stars in particular, in general they were the energy sources of thousands of worlds like this one. And he could imagine that, within his field of vision, there were scores of Cultural Enlistment teams searching for near-civilizations that could be boosted over the hump into productivity of one sort or another. No one seemed to mind, however, that the euphemistic terms "subsidiary culture" and "apprenticeship in trade" were merely synonyms for "short-changed."

It was a moonless night and he felt a sense of disappointment that he would not enjoy counting the number of tiny human forms silhouetted, spritelike, in flight against a bloated lunar disc. The starlight in itself was not sufficient to lure the Soarers from their communities.

Saul plodded up the companionway and paused to light his pipe. Then he came over and leaned heavily against the port.

"It's a cinch they won't be *talked* out of their indolence," he said, nodding toward the forest.

"I wouldn't call it that," Turner objected.

"No, I don't suppose you would. You'd probably call it rustic simplicity or idyllic existence. Well, let me tell you they are *intelligent, capable.* They've *got* the potential, just like I suspected."

"How do you know?"

"Rankin. He completed his concept probe. And he's found they're not below delving into what we would consider advanced cosmological theory."

"Thinkers," Turner offered.

"Thinkers and players. But not workers." Saul noisily sucked smoke through moisture in the stem of his pipe while the glow from its bowl limmed the near frustration on his face. But there was more than that. Turner detected a stubborn resolution too.

"But we'll enlist them!" Saul vowed. "You can count on that."

"How?"

"On Xantes we ran into an agricultural setup. Complete self-sufficiency, contentment, disinterest. How did we do it there? A little meteorological meddling and there you had it—'The Endless Drouth'."

TURNER took out a cigarette and let it dangle, unlighted, from his lips. "I remember that one. It kicked back with a shake-up in the bureau. Everybody connected with the project got bounced. A bunch of detention terms were dealt out too. Even

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Cultural Enlistment methods are limited."

"Not for directors who know how to file reports. And the Xantites today would be the first to admit that the director of that project did the right thing. They soon learned that a barrel of contrathene would bring enough food to last the average family a week. Now we're even helping them build cities."

"Cities they never needed for contrathene that's really worth a fortune a barrel."

There wasn't enough light to see it, but Turner could feel the other's scowl.

"Nevertheless," Saul pushed on, "the answer to this challenge lies in manipulating the environment, just like on Xantes."

"Putting something hostile in it?" Turner could hardly help but be amused at the other's inordinate resolve.

"Exactly. Now if we could call in a biogenetic crew and have them develop a strain of *flying* ogobeasts—"

Turner glowered.

"Gradually, of course," Saul continued. "Over several generations the Soarers would have to adapt to the new conditions. We would help them acquire enough weapons to make a continuing but not too successful—nor too dismal—fight of it. Then, little by little, we'd egg them on into their own productive niche."

"The gentle shove," Turner said. "The helping hand bit."

But the poorly veiled contempt eluded Saul. "Another way would be if they didn't have wings. Then it would have to be material progress—*or else.*"

"If they didn't have wings," Turner ventured, "they'd be extinct."

Rising abruptly, he flipped his cigarette into the disposal chute and headed for the companionway. "When do we tell them the real reason we're interested is because an advance survey team detected flush deposits of neptunium? That we want them to work a few mines—for the good of the galaxy?"

"Damn it! Why do you have to be so cynical?"

TURNER would have stomped the rest of the way out, but Rankin was coming up the ladder so he decided he might as well stay and see what the psychologist had to offer. It couldn't be very important. His attitude was too casual.

Rankin turned the compartment lights brighter and paused beside Turner. "Glad you're here. You've spent a lot of time with the natives. Maybe you can validate something for me."

"What is it?" Saul broke in.

"I had our subject out from under the probe a while back—to check on something I was be-

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ginning to suspect." Rankin ran a hand through hair that had long since departed his scalp. "I pointed to the alpha wave generator and shouted, 'Watch out! There's an ogobeast!' He panicked. It was a half hour before I could convince him it was only a harmless piece of equipment."

He faced Turner. "Ever run into anything like that here?"

Turner shook his head.

"What does it mean?" the director asked.

Rankin shrugged bony shoulders that seemed ready to puncture the padding of his jacket. "They're incredibly suggestible —almost hypnotically so—in areas of emotional significance.

"I've never seen anything like *that*," Turner said.

"I don't suppose you have after all," the psychologist conceded. "You'd have no reason to think of trying that stunt. And, as for themselves, deception isn't part of their makeup. So you wouldn't see one of them playing that sort of prank on another."

Saul's mouth hinged open in a moment of inspiration. "Maybe that's the solution! Maybe *suggestion* will make them accept the beginnings of a technological culture!"

Turner swore under his breath. There it was again. If anything —*anything at all*—could be twisted toward the end of Cultural Enlistment, you could count on the director to do the twisting.

"Afraid not," Rankin said. "That's obviously not a psychological area of suggestibility. Or they certainly would have taken the bait with all the preaching they've had on it up until now."

But the director was obviously determined. "Let's talk this over. Maybe we can figure out something."

For the second time Turner started to leave. And for the second time the way was blocked by someone else approaching. It was Howell, in charge of ship's complement. He had a roll of microfilm from the expedition's library and a portable scanner.

He thrust them both at Saul. "Run through this," he suggested excitedly.

The director glanced uncertainly at the youngish man, disparagingly at his unkempt shock of red hair. And, for a moment, Turner wasn't sure whether he would order Howell back to crew's quarters with a lecture on presumptuousness or look at the film. Saul decided on the latter.

After a moment he looked up. "It's a treatise on aerodynamics."

"Right. I did a thousand double takes at Soarers' wings before I began suspecting what I should have remembered from preantigrav school. It's all there on that film. You take an average

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Soarer and figure the flying load he represents—say seventy-five pounds. Then you factor in flat-plate resistance in flight attitude, together with atmospheric drag. To get lift you have to balance that against total wing area and camber, frequency of flaps and—"

"Get to the point, Howell," Saul interrupted.

"The point is simply this: Those wings couldn't lift a fifth the weight of a Soarer. By all the laws of aerodynamics, *Soarers can't fly!*"

FOREARM folded beneath his head, Gom lay on his side in the bower. His eyes had become accustomed to the early night, even to the almost negligible light filtering down through the foliage. Thus he was able to stare in fascination at the smile that pulled warmly at Edyl's full lips while she slept. It was a subtle expression of contentment and anticipation and it filled him with deep appreciation.

That she had gone to sleep so soon and was missing the conversation period was but a measure of her fatigue after her harrowing experience that afternoon.

Conversation period had, ever since the advent of the Star Visitors, posed a demanding obligation on the Soarers of Gom's community, he opined. Normally the end of the day, the twilight between wakefulness and sleep, was the occasion for swapping experiences, passing on news or just simply chatting with a favored but possibly never seen acquaintance in some community perhaps at the far end of the continent.

Like now, Gom suggested to himself as he cast aside his thoughts to receive those of Varel in the settlement all the way over at the other end of the mountain range:

"Niaira's all right now, Gom."

"That's fine. There wasn't any broken bone then?"

"No, thank the Merciful Sky God. Just a twist. I made her bake it in the sun. Now she can walk with hardly any pain."

Silence—for a moment.

"Gom! We're just looking at the most beautiful sunset we've ever seen over the sea!" That thought from the northwest village. *"Such marvelous colors!"*

"Cheri—" he answered the girl, *"it's happened."*

"Edyl?"

Unconsciously, he nodded. *"Tomorrow she's going to start dieting on genlu berries."*

"Oh, that's splendid! Now I must tell the other villages about our sunset!"

Another thought-free moment, then—

"Anything new with the Star Visitors, Gom?" That query from Faul in a northern community.

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Gom answered vapidly. *"Same old stuff. Why don't we quit flitting around and start making something and they'll be glad to show us how. But Edyl got swatted by an ogobeast today."*

"No!"

Gom had to rethink the entire episode for him.

And that's how it went—chatter, pass the word, spread the news, tell the day's happenings. Always, Gom reflected, it was what would be considered insignificant by the Star Visitors. But they simply couldn't understand that what *they* deemed the minor things were actually the only really important ones.

As he had been thinking before Varel's interruption: That was the way it went *normally*. But now—since the great wingless thing from the Stars had dropped down by Gom's community—there had been hardly any peace of mind, nocturnal or otherwise. For that occurrence had shoved this village into the focal point of all conversation period activity.

The sound of questioning Soarer voices and the pressure of intense light against his now closed eyelids brought him out of his doze and he went outside.

The Visitors were returning for one of their rare nighttime calls. Already they had left a brilliant light-casting sphere hanging out there above the trees like a private sun while they descended through the foliage.

GOM flew over to the communal lodge and lighted on the porch just as the Wise One, rubbing sleep from his eyes, stepped out. Together they watched the wingless pod float down to the main bough. Sunbeams darted from its side, attaching themselves to the bark and holding the flying thing in place. The ones called Saul and Turner leaped out.

Watching them approach along the length of the porch, Gom puzzled at their behavior. Turner kept grabbing Saul's arm and the latter kept jerking free. It was obvious that the blond haired one didn't want Saul to do whatever it was he was about to do.

"We've got something to talk over with you," Saul said rather sternly as he drew up before Monur.

"You're always welcome," the Wise One returned, but not without an unavoidable yawn.

Scores of Soarers were converging upon the lodge—all making their way along the various interwoven branches of the casala trees rather than trust their flight judgment in the harsh, unnatural light.

Saul reached under the covering that hid his torso and pulled out a dead bird. Between upraised hands he stretched its

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wings to their full span. "Look at this."

"It's a swiftlark," Monur said.

"Notice how large its wings are?"

Turner mouthed something harsh in the Visitors' tongue and Saul shoved him back.

"Would you say it's like all your other birds?" Saul asked.

"In many ways, yes."

And Gom wondered why a dejected cast had fallen over Monur's face. It was as though he *knew* and was saddened by what the Visitor would have to say.

"In any particular way?"

The Wise One hesitated. "They all have large wings."

"And the Soarers?"

Monur's lips trembled. "We all have small wings."

TURNER advanced again and shouted at Saul, who only outdid him in a brief flow of gruff words.

"You respect the great knowledge of the Star Visitors, don't you?" Saul prompted after the other Visitor had drawn back.

Monur nodded.

"And you know that what we say is true because we are more familiar with the laws of the Sky God?"

"It is so. What you say is—logical."

"Then I tell you now that there are Sky God laws which say that for every measure of weight there must be a certain size of wing to carry it through the air."

Monur slumped to the floor and sat with his head bowed. "And our wings," he muttered disconsolately, "are much too small for us to fly."

Saul straightened in surprise. "You *know?*"

"I know. And I suspect that others who have lived as long as I and thought as deeply know also. But we've never spoken about it. We've never even admitted it to ourselves. For myself, I was afraid. I felt that we were flying by the grace of some streak of forgetfulness in the Sky God—that if we even thought seriously of the Divine mistake. He would realize He had done something illogical."

The Wise One sighed. "But now that you have mentioned it, it is no longer something we can deny or hide under our fear of *not* being able to fly."

Gom seized the porch railing, confused and afraid. It was like the time he had first risen to the air. And he could well remember, with nightmarish vividness, standing on the family bough, terrified at the idea of leaping off, *knowing* that either his wings would rip apart or he wouldn't be able to move them. Now he felt the same unreasonable fear. Only, it wasn't so unreasonable after all and it was a thousand times more paralyzing. In his

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distress he hardly even noticed Turner going back to the wingless thing, subdued and dejected.

The Wise One was shaking his head. "Now there can be no more escape from reason. And if the Sky God decreed that you should make us see our own stupidity, then I suppose the time has arrived for us to face reality."

Monur rose and trudged back into the gloom of the darkened lodge.

BEFORE sunrise Turner was pacing outside the ship. Whenever he changed direction, though, his head swung back eastward to scan the cloud-dappled sky above the forest. He strained occasionally with an eagerness to resolve an airborne mote into the outline of a Soarer. Each time, however, he finally recognized only a feathered avian form.

His hand shook as he lit a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke out into the damp air.

Why, he wondered, should he feel so concerned over the Soarers? It was a sense of kindred association, almost an affection. And, to explain it he knew he would have to reach deeper than consideration of their underprivileged status or his warm appreciation of having looked in on what Saul would disparage as a "utopia of rustic simplicity."

And he remembered now that as a child he had been exposed to Terralore by a widely traveled friend of the family whose name he couldn't even remember, except that it was O' something or other. And he had avidly absorbed all the tales of the Little People, the fairies and elves, the sprites and pixies and numerous other intriguing, carefree beings of fantasy. They had meant hours of captivating imagining in his somewhat drab world. And they all had two pleasant faculties in common. They flew on lacy, tiny wings and brought excitement if not spirited happiness wherever they went.

Certainly, the Soarers were not lacking in either of those capabilities.

Turner paced to the end of the row of air cars, reversed direction and started back.

Just then the main hatch of the ship swung open and three men, strapping on holsters as they emerged, raced for the nearest shuttle.

Turner shouted to find out the reason behind their precipitate action. But, ignoring him, they piled into the craft and sent it recoiling skyward.

Two more armed security crews lunged from the starship, breaking for the row of cars.

Turner managed to seize one of the men by his jacket. "What is it?"

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"General alarm! Ogobeasts attacking Soarers!"

"But how—"

"They're not flying any more!" The man broke free and rejoined his crew.

THREE other contingents spilled out of the main hatch, followed by Saul. The latter sighted Turner and hurried over.

"We've got to see Monur!"

He handed Turner a gun and shoved him toward the remaining craft. "Just heard from Banks out in the eastern sector. Says the Soarers quit flying—in all of their villages!"

Saul hustled him into the car and climbed in beside him, immediately gunning it into the air.

"They haven't *quit*," Turner corrected. "They *can't* fly."

Saul sent the shuttle streaking for the forest. "I didn't think it would work *this* way. I thought they might *gradually* lose interest in flying.

The director seemed somewhat concerned. And Turner welcomed the possibility that he might be remembering the expedition leader who had drawn a detention term for criminal conduct on Xantes.

"I thought Rankin said they were suggestible only in areas of emotional significance," Saul reminded.

And Turner couldn't avoid the impression that there might, after all, be a tinge of satisfaction to the director's reaction. "What could be more emotionally significant than flying? Their entire esthetic appreciation is wrapped up in it."

"You *knew* this would happen?" Saul wanted to know.

"I knew *something* would happen. But how are the ogobeasts getting to them?"

"It's their food gathering parties that are catching hell."

Turner held a grim face forward as the forest welled into prominence beneath the nose of the craft. "Thank God it was night when they grounded themselves!"

FOR an eternity Gom worked his way tediously, sometimes most painfully, down the slick vine tendril. From time to time his grip relaxed and he began slipping along the stem. On those occasions he was able to check his fall only by restoring purchase—at the expense of adding burns on top of the burns already crowding his palms, thighs, shins.

Below, three ogobeasts whirled on their hind legs to paw at the dangling stem. The animals had been attracted to the site by the scent of the hunters who had already lowered themselves and gone in search of fruit. For Gom, it was most disheartening that the carnivores had arrived while

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he was taking time to assure Edyl there was no other way to get food for the village. That the ogobeasts had meanwhile collected beneath the community was no valid excuse for him to shirk his duties.

It wasn't necessarily certain encouter with the enraged creatures that awaited him down there, however. That the vine tendril hung free would accommodate his plan.

Almost at the end of the stem, he remained just out of clawing distance of the beasts. High above, Soarer women were looking down and screaming. Edyl's voice, more strained with terror, stood out above the others'. From their perspective, he realized, it must seem that each ogobeast swat would fell him from his perch.

Squirming, he kicked his legs forward, then backward, forward, backward. The branch far overhead began swaying with the motion and presently he was swinging in an ever broadening sweep. Up he went, then down, then back up again until it seemed that the interval between each pendulous arc took him over vast stretches of forest floor.

Confused, the ogobeasts lunged first in one direction, then in the other. But, to Gom's intense satisfaction, they never appeared to be heading the same way he was.

Thus, they were in no position to see what had happened to their prey when, at the full extent of his next swing, he released the vine and seized another that was rooted in a dense clump of underbrush. He shinnied to the ground, stealing out into the open and racing off after the other food gatherers.

At the top of a rise he glanced back and saw two of the ogobeasts sniffing the forest floor while the third sat casting uncertain glances at the dangling vine.

Ahead—quite far ahead, considering that the distance had to be negotiated on foot—was the grove whose fruit would suffice to tide the village over until a food supply system could be worked out. Gom thought wistfully of the wings that hung against his back—a handicap, whereas before they had been his very life. Against his better appreciation of logic, he extended them and worked them vigorously through their arcs. Besides adding to his fatigue, however, the effort produced no other results.

HE trotted through a depression, up another rise and around a clump of bushes. Then he pulled up short and found himself standing almost face to face with a pair of ogobeasts.

They trumpeted and charged

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and he whirled and raced back the way he had come, managing only to lose ground all the while to the ferocious carnivores.

Over the next rise he put on a desperate burst of speed when he saw two boulders up ahead. Covering the distance with the beasts almost upon him, he dived into a crevice between the rocks.

The animals rammed into the boulders and the rocks shook under the impact, the crevice widening and closing again in a chattering motion.

The stones, Gom saw as he retreated as far as he could into the fissure, were held apart by a projection on one of them. A furry paw raked the opening, its talons scarcely missing his chest.

The other creature charged again, colliding with the loose rock. It teetered outward and hung there for a moment before *thunking* back in place.

"Gom! Gom! Where are you?"

He didn't answer Edyl. If he had, she would have learned he was in danger.

Instead, he watched the rock shudder open and fall back into place once more. And he wondered how long it would be before it was thrown off balance in the other direction, leaving him exposed to the ogobeasts.

EVEN before Saul had anchored the air car to the central tree, Turner leaped onto the porch of the lodge, pausing to listen to the heavy stillness that embraced the air like the grip of death. It was a profound silence of wings. He started over to where Monur sat, cross-legged and downcast. But he halted when he saw the Soarer women huddled together on a nearby bough, some of them poised on hands and knees in order to peer down over its side at the four anxious beasts below.

He drew his gun and fired repeatedly—until three of the animals had dropped lifelessly to the ground. The fourth managed to limp to concealment in the underbrush, half its flank blown away.

But killing the creatures was no solution—not when it would take an army of exterminators to purge the continent.

Saul confronted the Wise One. "Don't let any of your men go after food," he instructed. "We'll see that you get whatever you need. We'll supply you with a few weapons too—enough to hold you up until we can get the program under way."

Turner regarded the director critically, realizing he had been naive to think this visit to the village was motivated by anything but selfish interest in advancing the purpose of the expedition.

He gripped Saul's shoulder and spun the man around. "Soarers are getting killed all over the

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continent—*because of us!*" he exclaimed in his own language.

"But it won't read that way when I file—"

Intolerant now, Turner shouted, "I'm going to *see* that it does!"

Saul's expression faltered before the severity of the words. And, for a moment, it appeared he might be surmising he could just possibly be in trouble.

Monur, evidently assuming that the tense silence between the two men was the occasion for him to answer Saul, said, "But our food gatherers have already gone out. They should be coming back shortly—all except five of them, possibly six."

"You'll order them back at once," Saul directed, still trying to cling to his mastery of the situation.

"That I will not do," said the Wise One with proper self-esteem. "We have always provided for our own needs. And we shall continue to do so."

Saul stepped back indecisively. It appeared he might be realizing that depriving the Soarers of their ability to fly had not only been irrevocable, but had also failed to bend circumstances to his advantage.

"But you've *got* to!" he insisted weakly.

IN one of the bole-bough cradles of a nearby tree a Soarer mother clung to her baby, rocking to and fro and perhaps, without realizing it, deriving as much consolation from the motion as the child.

When the bough breaks, Turner thought, the cradle will fall . . . Only, the bough had already broken, in a manner of speaking. And that baby, mother and the entire Soarer population would eventually fall was a foregone conclusion—unless—

"Monur," he pleaded, stepping forward. "You can fly! We told you *wrong!*"

"You only told us what we should have admitted to ourselves long ago."

"But you *can* fly! You say you're a logical people. Isn't it only logical that if you've already *proved* you can fly you can *go on* flying?"

"It was only a mistake of the Sky God."

"Gods don't make mistakes!"

"Then He was only making sport of us."

Dejected, Saul appeared to have despaired of enlisting the Soarers. He only stood there glum and distant—possibly brooding over the penalties for criminal misconduct.

Turner glanced helplessly away and saw a young Soarer woman creeping along a bough toward the lodge. Trembling, she paused to cling to the branch. He thought she looked familiar, then

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recognized her as Gom's mate.

He turned back to Monur. "It *wasn't* a mistake of the Sky God!" he persisted. "Our air cars fly, don't they? And they don't even *have* wings!"

The Wise One wasn't impressed. "It's like you once said—they fly in accordance with some other law of the Sky God."

Turner saw he would get nowhere, neither in this community nor in any of the others. If it had been logically proved they couldn't fly *with their wings,* then they would remain grounded until the *real* reason for that ability was convincingly presented to them.

But how could that reason be ascertained if there wasn't a single Soarer left who could still use his wings?

Her face overcast with unspoken importunity, Gom's mate had arrived at that section of bough closest to the lodge. Apprehensively, she regarded the still considerable distance separating her from the porch.

Turner went over, extended his hands and helped her across.

The girl's eyes were moist. "Gom's in trouble! He won't answer me. If he were all right, he'd answer right away!"

Even the burden of distress, Turner noted, had failed to dampen the lilting melody of her words. "Which way did he go?"

She pointed.

He headed for the air car, drawing her along. Saul fell in behind them but said nothing. The play of anxious expressions across his face suggested he was still wrestling with the possible serious consequences of the mission.

GOM scraped away more of the earth that was packed in the rear wedge of the crevice and managed once again to squirm farther away from the straining paw. Whenever the loose boulder rocked outward with the ramming force of an ogobeast, however, he had to lurch forward so he wouldn't be crushed as it closed again. Each time he shifted position in this manner, talons raked his flesh, leaving discolored welts on tawny skin.

"Gom! Where are you? Please answer me!"

The rock bolted outward and *crunched* back into place and the creature that had rammed it withdrew for another charge, roaring without pause.

"Edyl!" he muttered, half unconsciously.

"Gom! Oh, Gom—thank God you're all right! I'm with the Wingless Ones. We're coming!"

The coherency of his thoughts, however, was shattered by another impact of brute hulk against the boulder. Then he heard the lazy *hiss* of an air car.

Under the pulverizing force of

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a final, violent contact, the huge slab of stone shuddered upright, stood there for a moment, then crashed over on its side, jarring the earth.

The ogobeast that had been straining at the entrance drew erect and, trumpeting, raised both paws high over Gom's head.

Then in the next instant it crumpled as blood spewed from its shredded head.

Gom watched the second creature collapse at the beginning of still another charge.

Presently the air car was settling down beside the boulder and Edyl, at a speed she couldn't have equaled had she been in flight, was racing up.

She embraced him and pressed her cheek fiercely against his. "Oh, Gom—you won't ever leave the trees again, will you?"

She backed off and her eyes moistened with compassion as she regarded the welts on his chest.

"Come on, Gom. We've got plenty to do." It was Turner who had leaned out of the air car to shout over to him. Saul was along too.

Gom helped Edyl in and they stood in the space between Turner and the other Star Visitor.

Turner smiled. "Rough time, eh?"

Embarrassed, Gom evaded the question. "You're taking us back to the village?"

"Not for a while. Will you come with us?"

"But there are other food gatherers—"

"Someone else will take this car and go hunt for them. But there's something more important for us to do. And we need your help."

To Gom, it seemed that the Wise One of the Star Visitors—Saul—was unusually silent. He only sat there staring ahead, his fingers intertwined and moving nervously against one another.

"We'll come," Gom said.

IN a large room of the huge star car, Gom tensed and felt Edyl's grip tighten on his forearm as they caught sight of several ogobeasts moving rapidly across the plain in the distance.

"So you see," Turner resumed, "that actually there is no logical reason why you can't fly."

Gom shook his head. "I don't know what you mean when you talk about something causing a —what did you call it? —*mental block*. All I know is that it's like Monur says and all the Wise Ones agree—there is no real reason why we *should* be able to fly."

"But there is! Only, we can't explain it. Gom, Edyl—fly—*now!*"

Gom stared at his mate, then back at Turner and Saul. This was all so senseless. There was

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nothing more to be proved. Yet, he rose to his feet and Edyl stood up beside him. He set his wings in motion and she did likewise.

"Faster! Harder!" Turner encouraged.

Wishing only to please the man, Gom put all his strength into the effort. Edyl, too, strained to get airborne. But she only succeeded in throwing herself off-balance.

Gom helped her up and, folding his wings, offered an apologetic gesture to Turner.

"If we could only get just one of them up!" Turner muttered.

Saul's expressionless face burst into a convulsion of anxiety. "They're not trying, Turner! I'll show you how to make them —"

But Turner seized the man's arm and pulled him back. "They're trying."

Gom watched Saul's shoulders slump as the Wingless Wise One turned distressed eyes on the other Star Visitor. "We've *got* to make them put their minds to it! They're hundreds of Soarers dying out there! I'm not going to take this by myself, Turner. I warn you—when they start nosing around I'll tell them it was your idea, yours and Rankin's. They'll believe *me!*"

Saul was exceedingly agitated, Gom noticed—so much so that he had forgotten he was still speaking the Soarer tongue.

But Turner wasn't listening. Instead he was staring at nothing as he made a slight snapping sound with his fingers and whispered, "That's it!"

Excitedly, he turned on Saul. "Rankin—where is he?"

"Why, I don't know."

"Does he still have that Soarer with him?"

Before Saul could answer, Turner raced to the wall and talked rapidly, in his own language, to a small shining thing. It spoke back and Gom saw Saul's face brighten as he overhead what was being said.

Turner hung the thing back on the wall and knelt in front of Gom, seizing his shoulders. "When a Soarer reaches out with his thoughts—how far can he be heard?"

Gom puzzled over the question, not at all understanding the purpose behind it. "Once a flight of Soarers went exploring. They flew down the isthmus and on around into the next continent. When they got as far as they could go, we couldn't hear from them any longer."

"Are you sure?"

Edyl nodded. "We can reach out only so far—no farther."

Turner rose. "I want you to go outside for a while. Wait there for me. I'm taking the star car up." He gestured toward Saul. "He'll stay too to see that nothing happens to you."

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Saul began to protest, "I—"

Then Gom shielded his ears as Turner loosed torrents of harsh Star Visitor words at the man.

When he had finished, Saul led Gom and Edyl outside while Turner raced off in another direction.

AT two planetary diameters out, Turner called up to the control compartment from the psycholab and instructed Howell to cut the main drive.

"No orbit?" Howell asked over the intercom.

"Free fall will do. We'll need only a little while for what I have in mind."

"Free fall it is. Anything else?"

"Yes. Two things. First, adjust pseudogravity to the exact equivalent of the planetary constant below."

Turner felt the pull of his weight shift slightly.

"Done," said Howell.

"Next—don't take your eyes off the total mass indicator. What's it reading?"

"A little over fifteen thousand tons."

"Not good enough. This has to be exact—right down to the last pound."

Howell's impatient sigh rasped through the intercom. "Three million, twenty-seven thousand, one hundred and ninety eight pounds."

"Good. Now just stand by."

Turner went over to the couch and watched Rankin lift one of the Soarer's eyelids.

"I've already stuck him," the psychologist said. "He'll come around in a minute."

"You sure he hasn't been out from under the probe since before yesterday evening?"

"Not for a second. What's this all about?"

"This Soarer—what's his name?—Zeun happens to be the only one who can still fly. Why? Because he's been dealt out of the news swapping since before the rest of them grounded themselves."

Rankin shrugged. "So we've got a Soarer who can still fly. And we're out of telepathic range of the planet. Now what?"

"In all your Cultural Enlistment experiences, Rankin, have you ever run into any valid instances of psychokinesis?"

The psychologist thought a moment. "On several occasions. I think the most remarkable one was only a couple of years back. An agricultural people. They *actually* exercised a degree of thought control over weather conditions."

Turner glanced down at the Soarer, who had raised a limp hand to his forehead. "That's not what I mean. I had in mind something like—*auto*psychokinesis, if there is such a thing."

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Before Rankin could answer, Zeun sat up and looked around.

Turner put a hand on his shoulder. "You'll find you can't reach out to any of your people," he said in the Soarer's language. "But that'll be for only a short while."

The diminutive humanoid stood on the couch and stretched the kinks out of his muscles. "Are you through with me?"

"We will be soon." Turner went over to the intercom and spoke to Howell. "You watching the mass indicator?"

"Haven't taken my eyes off it."

Turner stared at the Soarer. "All right, Zeun—let's see you fly."

"In here? the humanoid asked, glancing around at the congestion of instruments while the glare of fluorescent illumination played softly against his golden skin.

"Then just hover."

ZEUN set his delicate wings in rapid motion and Turner watched his heels, then his toes come up off the couch. Suspended close to the overhead, he filled the compartment with the fluttering noise of his wings.

"Howell?" Turner queried the intercom.

"Nothing yet," came back the answer.

Turner was disappointed. "Nothing *at all?*" he asked again.

"Nothing to amount to anything. The reading's still just a little over fifteen hundred tons."

"What's the *exact* value?"

"Three million, twenty-seven thousand, one hundred and thirty-three pounds. Say! That's sixty-five pounds less than it was a minute ago!"

Turner had never grinned more broadly. "Now watch it closely, Howell. All right, Zeun, land."

Zeun dropped down.

Howell announced with no little amount of astonishment, "Back up to one ninety-eight!"

"I don't understand—" both Rankin and Howell began at the same time.

"How much would you say Zeun weighs?" Turner asked the psychologist.

"Seventy-one pounds. I weighed him when he came aboard."

"Then you see what's happened, don't you?"

Rankin only shook his head.

"Zeun, who weighs seventy-one pounds *normally*, has wings that couldn't possibly lift more than fourteen or fifteen pounds. But they *don't have to* lift more than that because when he flies *his weight drops down to a mere six pounds!* You see he unconsciously generates a psychic force that counteracts gravity! It's like Saul guessed without

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realizing it—before they can fly they've got to *put their minds to it.*"

ON the way down Turner told Zeun all that had happened while he had been under probe. And he made certain the Soarer understood that, while he couldn't possibly fly in accordance with the Sky God's laws that had to do with winged flight, he *could* fly, and excellently, under the ones governing the direct, moving power of thought.

That the explanation, couched in simple terms, appealed to the humanoid's keen sense of logic was proved when Zeun flew the length of a passageway and back.

When they broke atmosphere, Zeun was in the control compartment with Turner and Howell. The humanoid, however, merely sat huddled in a corner, apparently deep in communicative thought.

A mile above the clearing wherein the ship had nested, Turner hunched closer to the view screen and tensed. He twisted a dial and the perspective zoomed down on the plain.

Magnified into clarity was Saul, on one knee and firing frantically at two charging ogo-beasts.

Behind him, Gom and Edyl, facing the other direction, clung to each other as they retreated from a third fury of claws.

Gom backed into Saul and the expedition leader swung a stiff arm around behind him in a sharp, protesting blow that knocked the Soarer pair sprawling.

Turner lunged for the forward gun's firing stud. But already it was too late. The third creature had started its leap, which took it over the heads of Gom and Edyl and landed it squarely on Saul's back.

The huge shadow of the ship put the animals to flight shortly thereafter, but not before it was too late to do anything for Saul.

IT was fully a day later that Howell, with all air cars and the rest of the equipment drawn back into the forward hold, lifted the ship gently spaceward on its repulsors.

He had to creep through the atmosphere in deference to the Soarer horde that cavorted about the vessel until it reached an altitude where the air was too thin to breathe.

On the fringe of space, he sent the ship lunging for the stars and relaxed, grinning over at Turner. "So much for the Soarers—a culture most unfit for enlistment, wouldn't you say?"

"That's how the report'll read, at any rate." Turner flipped off the rearward view screen. "Who ever heard of miners with wings?"

THE END

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For a man who had just ruthlessly killed his shipmates, the prophecy of immortality seemed a mad jest. But Buck Garrett lived to learn the grim irony that tinged the predictions of . . .

the Red Flowers of Tulp

By JOSEPH E. KELLEAM

Illustrator WALKER

THE authorities at Mars City were not trustful; they had many questions to ask. Ships did go out with seven men and return with three, but not often. Buck Garrett was a genius, in his own way. He stuck to the story of Venusian sickness and produced the ship's log—that he had written—to prove his tale. The inspectors did not doubt that he was Captain Storme, owner and master of the little tramp ship, the Prairie Queen. Garrett, who was wanted on Earth for a couple of clever forgeries, had doctored Storme's papers with ease. His own photo and signature had replaced the captain's. As for the rest—general description, education, and experience—Garrett was as tall and dark as Captain Storme had been, and a much better talker.

Hull and Sanchez swore that the story was true, and the inspectors shrugged their shoulders. After all, these tramp ships were manned by brutes—and the fewer questions asked the better.

So Buck Garrett and Ted Hull and Pete Sanchez left the ugly little boat at the space-port and went into Mars City. Their pockets were bulging with notes and gold, and Garrett carried a parchment in his pocket that told of a platinum mine on frozen Ganymede. If they thought of the four men they had left to die on the asteroid called Achilles it was only casually. They were sailors in a new port, their pockets were full, and this was no time to worry about dead men.

A few hours after entering Mars City they found themselves straggling along a shabby street

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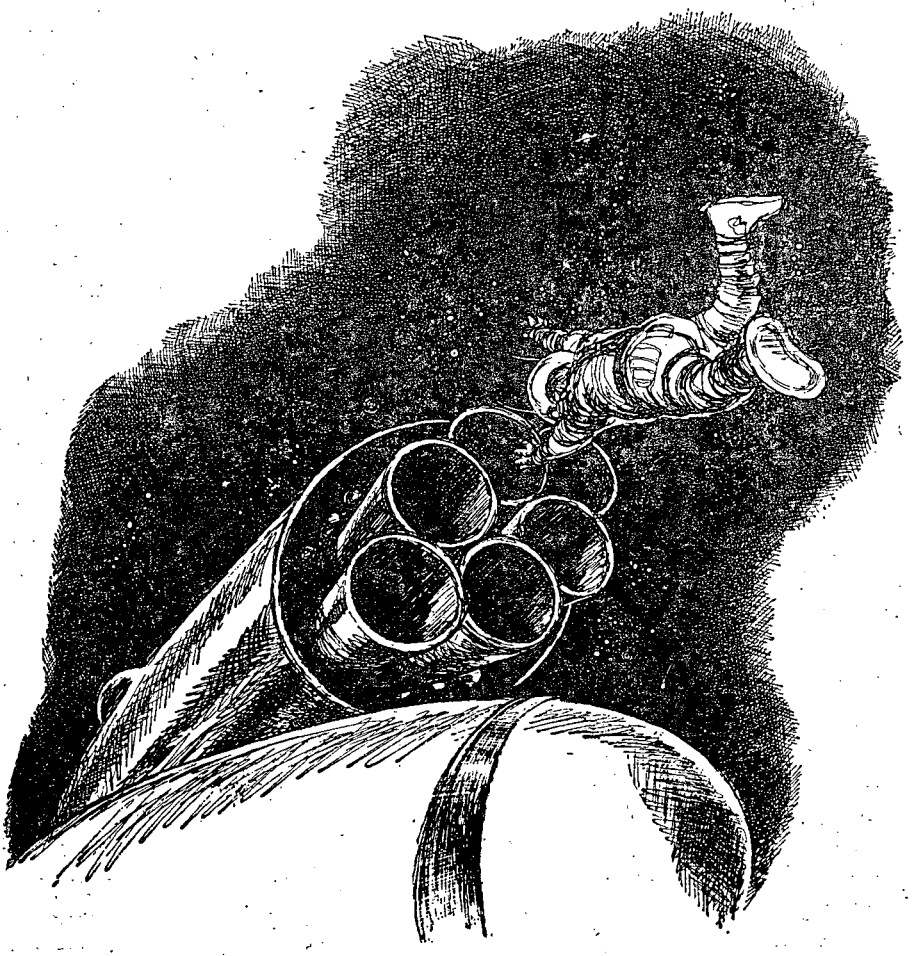
with half the saloons of the town behind them. Little Sanchez was hiccoughing, Ted Hull was stumbling. Only Garrett was sober.

Tony Sanchez stopped, lurched, and pointed. "Look, a carnival. If there's anything I like it's a carnival."

His two comrades halted beside him. In a vacant lot down the street was a patched tent, and in front of it a tall, thin man was bedevelling a handful of loiterers with glittering promises of what awaited them. A couple of faded hula girls were trying out



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a few steps and smiling in a bored fashion at the small crowd. Had the three men not been experienced travelers the crowd would have been of more interest than the dancers, for there were squat Martians, all heads and chests with frail arms and legs. A few Venusians with bloodless, white faces, fan-shaped ears, and squat bodies. Two or three dwarfy Centaurians stood behind the crowd and wailed in thin, piping voices that they could see nothing. A tatterdemalion of Earthmen of all sizes and colors completed the group. A calliope set up its toot-toot-toot of music. The thin man began his spiel over again; the hula girls wiggled, and beyond the tent a ferris wheel started moving with half its seats empty.

Ted Hull removed his hat, drew massive fingers through his red hair, and swore. "Real hula girls. Gosh. Makes me think of the fairs back in Missouri." His long, freckled face became sober, and his awkward arms began fidgeting, as he thought of the rivers and meadows and the arching hills of home. Unconsciously he spoke aloud, "I hadn't ought to have knifed the bastard—"

THEY joined the bystanders, and began to elbow their way to the platform. Men grumbled and cursed, but the sight of the broad shouldered Garrett and the larger but slower-moving Hull quieted them. Little Sanchez, with a towering friend at each side of him, grinned like a monkey and cursed everybody.

The tall, thin man went on with his hoarse-voiced speech: "The big show is now about to open. In this tent are some of the greatest freaks of the universe, not to speak of the beauties—" He winked and nodded to the hula girls who raised their arms and smiled. "You'll laugh at Punch and Judy," the tall man continued. "You'll be amazed at the collection of animals from three worlds. And, for a special fee, we are presenting for the first time a sight of the Red Flowers of Tulp—"

A murmur of wonderment and interest went through the crowd. Buck Garrett smiled sardonically. The Red Flowers of Tulp. Where would a two-bit outfit like this find the Red Flowers? He wondered if the Red Flowers existed at all. For years he had heard of them, just as he had heard of the Ghosts of Eros and the Flame-Winged Butterflies of Space. He had even heard some tall tales about Tulp—

Seeing that he had drawn the crowd's attention, the thin man raised his voice and pursued his speech. "Yes, gentlemen, the Red Flowers of Tulp. Brought back from the third world of Alpha

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Centauri after a journey of fourteen earth years. The Red Flowers, gentlemen. Neither flower nor flesh; voiceless, they speak. They see the past and the future. They read your minds. They tell your fortune. You may interview the Red Flowers singly or in groups, and remember, gentlemen," and he winked again, "anything that the Red Flowers say to you is a matter that is strictly between you and them. We are most discreet." He raised his voice to a husky bellow; "The big show is now ready to begin. Tickets enough for one and all. Don't crowd, Folks. Room enough for all. Step right up, please—"

The three men entered the stuffy little room that housed the Red Flowers. The light was bad, and they blinked several times before they could see those legendary creatures. Filling one side of the room was a great box, packed to the brim with a black soil that held myriads of glittering specks within it. And sprawled upon this black dirt were three Red Flowers. Buck Garrett wanted to laugh. The Red Flowers were only fleshy green globes with a crimson, tulip-shaped blossom spouting about each like a flaming plume. Each globe had a number of inch-long feelers projecting from it, and these spines constantly vibrated. Both the green bodies and the red flowers were set with the pinpoints of glittering dust that the soil contained. Buck smiled. He had seen cactus plants on Earth that looked stranger than these three Red Flowers.

THEN the voice spoke in his ear. "Hello, Buck Garrett," it said.

He started. So did his companions. "What you guys trying to do?" he asked vehemently.

"I didn't say nuttin, Buck," little Sanchez explained hastily.

"Me, neither," the freckled man assured him.

"Somebody spoke my name."

"Mine too," Sanchez said.

"And mine—"

"Gentlemen, the Red Flowers were speaking." The voice seemed to whisper in each man's ears. "Voiceless, we speak. We allowed ourselves to be brought here because time and space are nothing to us. Time is a river in which we swim up and down like bright-colored fish. And so, gentlemen, the future is the same to us as today. You, no doubt, wish to know about the future."

"No," screamed Sanchez, "I want nothing. I want to leave. Now."

"Gentlemen, you have paid your fare, and we who are neither flesh nor plant would not disappoint you. But, first, the past—"

"No," cried little Sanchez, "No, no, no."

"Shut up, you fool," Buck Gar-

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rett swore. "Let 'em talk. Who's afraid of a plant?"

The voice went on. "Gentlemen, you have done evil things. Recently you left four men to die on a tiny asteroid. You left them only a small quantity of food, three extra cylinders of oxygen and four extra batteries for warmth. Even now, Buck Garrett, you are going by the name of Storme, the captain you left to die—"

Sanchez was shaking. "Let me out of here. I'm leaving."

Garrett slapped him. The little man's face went white, and his hand came up to his cheek. He looked at Buck with smoldering eyes.

"Now, will you keep quiet!" Buck cautioned. "It's a trick, that's what."

The voice continued as though nothing had happened. "And now for the future. Tony Sanchez." The little man stiffened to attention. "Tony Sanchez, you shall die by great cold."

The little man sobbed. "No, no, no."

"Ted Hull—"

"Yes." The big man was still game.

"You shall die by fire."

"And you, Buck Garrett—"

Garrett straightened his broad shoulders and grunted.

"You shall never die."

Little Sanchez was whimpering when they left the tent.

"Shut up," Garrett urged. "It's a trick, that's what. Wait till we get our hands on that bird who was doing the barking."

The thin man was leaning against a post.

Garrett walked up to him and showed him the gun that rested in the pocket of his coat.

The thin man put down a cigarette and ground it beneath his heel. "Well, what do you want?" he asked dryly. "Out with it! Our take ain't enough to buy you a drink."

"Never mind, fella," Buck whispered. "All we want is a word with you. Let's walk a bit. Too many saps standing around here."

THEY walked. When they ducked into an off street they halted and leaned against a rickety building.

"Now, fella," Buck said softly, "get to talkin'. What's yer racket? What about these Red Flowers of Tulp?"

The thin man started, and laughed mirthlessly. "Oh, them? Did they say something they shouldn't have?" He lit another cigarette and puffed vehemently. "Oh, I told you the truth, I did. They come from the third world of Alpha Centauri, like I said. I bought 'em for a song. Thought the guy was crazy who sold 'em to me. But I know now why he sold 'em. Damn those things.

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They're ghouls, that's what. They feed on a guy's mind like it was a hunk of cheese."

"But what about this fortune-telling of theirs?" Ted Hull asked.

"I've talked with them about that—if you can say that they talk. They claim that they can travel back and forth into time as easy as you or I can cross the street. I don't understand that lingo. But I do know that they can read your mind, draw every spark of knowledge from it."

"And do they know the future?" little Sanchez asked.

The man swore. "Gentlemen, when I bought the Red Flowers I had my own show. I had money in my pockets. They told me I would lose everything. They told me I'd be a space tramp, a barker for a two-bit outfit. They told me I would go down, down, down until whiskey wouldn't help me, when I'd gone down so far I'd have to use cocaine and hemp and Venusian pulque to keep going. And, gentlemen, every word they said has come true. I'd leave the accursed things here, but I dare not. I dare not."

Buck Garrett who was watching the man's face saw a haunted, fearful look that might come into the eyes of one who has lost the last atom of hope—a look of utter desperation and horror, a look of sheer dread.

The stay of Garrett, Sanchez and Hull in Mars City was a brief but memorable one. Prospectors still entertain each other with stories of the time when those three bought drinks for every man in town. They bought all the stock and furnishings of the leading saloon and invited the adult population to a farewell party. Toward three in the morning, when the last bottle was finished, they proceeded to wreck the place. Then, leaving a wreckage of mirrors, furniture, and bars behind them, the town went home to sleep it off. The next day Garrett, Sanchez, and Hull boarded their tiny ship for parts unknown. "For a new strike," they told their friends. The police sighed with relief. The Prairie Queen vanished into space, never to be seen again.

THEY had little difficulty locating the mine on Ganymede. After a month's work in the cumbersome space suits they had over a ton of pure metal in five pound bars slagged out from an inexhaustible vein. Few men can stand Ganymede for any length of time. The drifting flakes of frozen carbon dioxide sliding and skittering against the space helmets make a frantic sound that sets men's minds to wavering. The cold pierces the insulated houses; and the bare, jagged, frozen landscape is so lonely and threatening that after

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a few weeks men shut their eyes while they are at work. A ton of platinum was enough. They decided to go back to Mars City.

The last bar was loaded. The last screw was taken from the little portable house. They were ready to go. Garrett stood at the door and looked out at the frozen waste.

"Well, I'm glad we won't be seeing this for a time. It gets on my nerves. Say," he shaded his eyes and peered out, "we left an oxygen tank out there. See it, Sanchez. You've got good eyes."

The little man nodded.

"Can't lose that. An extra tank of oxygen might mean the difference between a successful flight and a lost space-drifter. Go get it, Sanchez, while we make a last check."

Sanchez donned his space garb, stepped into the air lock, and then leaped out upon the frozen ground when the automatic door opened. The drifting snow grated against his helmet. He ran. It was but the work of a moment to reach the tank. It seemed light. With the huge cylinder clutched in his arms like an overgrown baby the little man raced back to the ship. The door was closed. He beat upon it with his fist. The door stayed shut; there was no answer save the grating of the snow across his suit.

Sweat broke out on Sanchez's body. Carefully he set the cylinder down and fumbled for the controls of his emergency radio set. There was a grinding of static in his ears, followed by a silvery chime as he made connection with the ship.

"Garrett, Hull," he called frantically. "The door! It's locked."

For answer Garrett's deep, bellowing roar set his ears to ringing. "Sure its closed, chump. We're getting ready to take off. Better run before these rocket tubes blast you to a cinder." The thin hum of motors reached Tony's headphones.

With a tiny squeak of fright the little man turned and fled. Suddenly a lurid flame appeared behind him, sending his shadow dancing and reeling before him. A blast of heat bit at his heels. The frozen, drifting flakes gyrated in the air as though a thousand devils were after them. Then with a roar and flash the little ship disappeared into the inky sky. Tony Sanchez was left there alone, sobbing like a child in a world of frozen death.

Slowly he walked back to the cylinder of oxygen that he had abandoned. It was blackened and twisted by heat. A long gash had split it from end to end. Sanchez sat down weakly. The oxygen in his suit was good for an hour; the heating unit was old and worn. The battery was nearly gone. He studied a number of meters on his chest by using the

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mirror that was fastened to his visor. The battery wouldn't last thirty minutes. Then he would start freezing.

Raising his fist to the sky he cursed his missing partners fluently. Then he buried his helmet in his hands and wept. "Garrett, Hull," he sobbed, "come back!" His only answer was the flakes of carbon-dioxide snow slithering against his suit. He shivered. That scraping, maddening noise. Why couldn't he become deaf?

Sanchez sat there for nearly fifteen minutes, thinking of the past, thinking of himself—and, above all, trying not to think of the future. He thought of the four men he had helped to maroon on the floating island, Achilles. He thought of other days. He thought of Mars City, and most of all he thought of the Red Flowers of Tulp. They had been right, then.

His heating unit was good for another fifteen minutes when he raised his hand and shut off the motor. With both hands he tugged at the catch that held his helmet to his suit. It moved slowly. He yanked, and it broke and came away in his hand. There was a hiss as the oxygen rushed out. For a second he was hidden by a cloud of vapor. Then the oxygen froze, and the atmosphere was clear save for the drifting flakes of snow. His suit crumpled and clung to his body as the piercing cold of Ganymede sucked the last degree of warmth from him. The frozen flakes drifted and swirled about the still form of Tony Sanchez. He had been sitting when he had flung off his helmet. In that position the cold had struck him, freezing him into a statute. And statue-like he would sit there forever.

BUCK Garrett and Ted Hull did not get back to Mars City. Out there in space they intercepted a broadcast. Captain Storme and his men were not dead. Miraculously they had been rescued by a passing freighter just as their oxygen was playing out and when the male planetoid, Achilles, was plunging out toward Jupiter. Captain Storme and his men had told their story. Buck Garrett, Ted Hull, and Tony Sanchez were known for what they were. A description of the ship was given. The space council was offering a thousand pieces of gold for each of them.

Hull's usually stupid face became seamed with worry.

"Buck, you got me into this," he groaned. "I've seen that prison on the moon. No man could get away from it. It's a living hell. Buck, Damn you, do something. You marooned those guys when I wanted to stick a knife in 'em. You—you bungler. Do something."

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Buck Garrett's face remained calm. "Shut up, you dumb ox. There wasn't one chance in a million that Storme would be picked up. Now, shut up and use your head for something besides bawling like a sick calf. There's a way out. First, we've got to get outside and camouflage this ship. They'll be after her any time now."

Hull produced a knife. "Okay, big shot. But remember this. It was your idea to take this ship. It was your idea to leave Sanchez to freeze. I'm through with your plans. And I'm watching you. Try any funny stuff with me and I'll whittle you down. I got a good mind to do it anyhow. Poor little Sanchez. Freezing out there on Ganymede. Best friend I ever had. Damn you, you skunk, why did I ever let you talk me into something like this?"

Garrett began cursing. "Stop blubbering, you sap. You're in this as deep as I am. Try to wiggle out now, and I'll pin the whole business to yer ears. Pull yourself together and get into a suit. We've got to work fast. It won't be an easy job to change this ship where a patrol boat won't know her. Now, hep!"

The two men in bulging suits and glass helmets crawled over the hull of the Prairie Queen like two small bugs. The utter blackness of space with its myriads of lights pressed down upon them, and the cold went over their suits with groping fingers looking for an opening. The Prairie Queen was changing. Her silvery hull was now black, and a pair of false jets were being welded to her sides.

THE men were now at work with welding torches, putting the finishing touches to the new jets. As they worked, Buck Garrett studied Hull's feet. Strapped to each clumsy shoe was a heavy magnetic plate; it fitted securely to the sole of the boot so that Hull seemed to be walking on unwieldy three-inch stilts. Slowly Garrett worked at the straps that held the plates to Hull's feet. The big man was working intently; Ted Hull prided himself on his ability as a welder. That had been his trade before he had knifed a man in a drunken brawl and fled into space to cheat a prison. Slowly Garrett worked at the straps. Finally the last buckle was undone. Then Garrett pretended to stumble and swung his torch against the big man's helmet.

With an oath Hull sprang back. The result was as Buck had planned. The magnetic plates clung to the sides of the ship; and Hull's body, practically weightless, shot away from the craft. Hull ceased moving at a distance of about fifty feet from the Prairie Queen, and slowly

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the pull of the little ship began to drag him back. More slowly than the fall of a feather through still air was Hull's descent to the sides of the Prairie Queen.

Garrett did not bother to watch Hull's slow fall; he was not interested in such a phenomenon. Hardly had Hull left the ship before Garrett was racing for the air lock.

He closed the lock behind him. Then he raced to the engine room and seated himself before a complicated switchboard. He pressed a button, and a screen on the wall before him started glowing. He turned a dial; the figure of Ted Hull, falling feet foremost, appeared on the screen. As he made this connection, Hull also contacted him with his portable radio.

"Damn you, Garrett," he cursed, "get me down from here. You double-crossing—" He ended with a barrage of curses that made Garrett smile. Buck twisted the dial and the image of Hull disappeared.

Then he made an adjustment and switched the screen on again. This time two tiny figures appeared against an expanse of blackness that was worked with a faint pattern of stars. One figure, little more than a speck, was the body of Hull, while the other that appeared no larger than a cigar was the Prairie Queen.

Garrett set to work at the controls. This time there would be no mistake. A cold smile was on his face. He started the motors.

Hull drifted downward. In his heart was a cold rage that was made even colder by a trace of fear. He had seen Garrett disappear into the ship. He knew that he had made contact with him when he called for help. But he received no answer. Was Garrett going to leave him to die? The plates of the Prairie Queen drew nearer. A breath of hope fluttered within him. Another minute now.

Then, ever so slowly, the Prairie Queen moved and turned. Garrett had started her after jets to throbbing. Hull looked down and screamed. He was falling helplessly into the yawning black tubes of the auxiliary jets.

A cold smile was on Garrett's face as he watched the two objects on the screen come together. Then, when they were nearly touching, he pulled another lever. The floors beneath his feet quivered as the Prairie Queen gained momentum and shot forward.

In the wake of the little craft a few red sparks glowed and died. The blast from the auxiliary jets had burned Ted Hull to a cinder.

TWO hundred hours later Garrett landed on Venus. He came down at the edge of a steam-

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ing swamp, and all about him was the lush foliage of the planet. When he peered out of a porthole he could see a number of leathery-winged birds settling back to the trees from which his sudden descent had frightened them.

All day he labored, carrying his precious platinum from the ship and removing all the stores and equipment that he might need. Toward dusk, when the silvery sky was deepening to a metallic gray, he entered the ship for the last time. Then he set the automatic controls, and calmly walked away. From the door of the little cabin that he had hastily built he watched the Prairie Queen. Suddenly there was a flash of fire, and the little ship disappeared into the deepening sky. Garrett sighed with relief. He had done a dangerous thing, but he was glad. That ship would have hanged him.

Garrett was no coward. Few men would have marooned themselves in a Venusian swamp. Men did not live long on Venus. With the exception of several scattered ports, Venus had defied all efforts at colonization. The few prospectors who entered the interior and came out alive told tales of man-eating wasps and devilish plants, of poison water and huge centipedes with mandibles like long knives.

Garrett knew what awaited him. Once before when the law had got too close on his trail he had hidden in a Venusian swamp. He knew that the law would not follow him here. He could lay low for a few months, then take some of his platinum into the nearest port. No one would suspect that he was not one of those half-crazed creatures, a Venusian prospector. The cloudbanks of Venus would bleach him paper-white. He could grow a beard, and Buck Garrett would be forgotten. As for the dangers of Venus, he knew them only too well.

There was poison water, but there were a few pure springs. The devil-plants were rare, and the centipedes kept each other killed off. The worst danger was the wasps, great yellow things nine feet long, meaner than hell and just as cunning. He knew one thing, though. They did not eat flesh. It was their grubs that had to have flesh. Once he had found a cave in which one of those grubs was feeding upon a centipede that was paralyzed but still alive.

It was an experience that he had tried to forget. But if a man watched closely the wasps couldn't get him. One shot from a rifle would wilt them down, if you knew where to aim.

The days passed. He stayed close to the cabin, locked inside it or seated in the doorway smok-

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ing one cigarette after another. The swamp before him was a stinking, festering bog in which slimy things wallowed; and the wood to his back was a shadowy almost impenetrable place from which occasionally came ear-splitting calls and nerve-racking screechings. He longed for the day when he would start the long journey around the swamp toward the nearest port. Anywhere would be better than this.

Then, one day, with a rifle in his hands and a huge pack fastened to his shoulders, he told his camp goodbye. Most of his platinum had been buried, but he still carried enough to pay his way. Later on, perhaps, he would come back for the bars, or return to face the corpse of little Sanchez and take more treasure from the mine on Ganymede.

BEFORE sundown he met with trouble. He was skirting the swamp, keeping a wary eye open for an attack when he met face to face with a giant centipede. It clicked its mandibles threateningly and hurried forward. He dropped to his knees and fired. His first shot stopped the thing; his second sent it crashing and quivering to the ground. Then there was a fluttering in his ears like the sound that a gust of wind makes when it strikes a pile of dead leaves. Something struck him between the shoulders and he went down. While he had been fighting the centipede a great wasp had fallen out of the sky behind him.

For a second the monster hovered over him, then drove its long sting into his back. Liquid fire poured into Garrett's spine. He screamed in agony, and the scream died in his throat. The pain stopped. He felt nothing now. He tried to move and could not. The paralysis had struck him when his eyes were open, and although he could feel nothing he found that he could see. He had fallen on his face beside a festering pool, and a frightened little snake was trying to bury itself in the yellow water.

Then he was lifted and carried through the air.

He was taken to the mouth of a little cave, like the one in which he had found the wasp's grub and its victim. Then his captor encased him in a huge transparent cocoon that reminded him of a capsule and left him alone.

Garrett was left facing the opening to the cave. Before him was another cocoon in which a strange thing with a round body and many feelers and legs lay imprisoned.

How long he lay there he did not know. The days and the nights went by; and the wind and the rain and the cloud-sifted sunlight came in their turn. And then one day he sensed

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movement. Something crawled from the back of the cavern and hesitated before him. It was a huge white grub, its body shining with moisture, its yellow mandibles working, its leprous sides panting with a sort of loathesome movement. In horror he watched as the thing studied him. Then it turned to the other capsule, and began gnawing away. As it gnawed, its lips drooled a greenish saliva; and as this struck the transparent cocoon in which its victim was encased the hard capsule melted away. The grub began to feed.

The days and the nights passed. And always before him was that slimy, white thing feeding on living flesh that disappeared, bite by bite. And still the wasp's victim lived on.

Garrett waited. Horror had throned herself within his brain. He waited and watched the thing feed, because he could not close his eyes. He prayed for the nights to come, and each night he lay there thinking that the white grub was advancing toward him.

And then, when madness was drawing a crimson sponge across his mind, he saw something glide into the door of the cave. It was another centipede. The grub tried to flee, but the huge mandibles closed upon it, sinking into its fat sides. And then the grub was eaten along with the fragments of its last victim. The centipede spied Garrett. It rushed at him and began gnawing at the capsule that was his transparent coffin.

GARRETT thought this was the end. And he was glad. But the huge mandibles tore at the capsule in vain. Finally the centipede gave up, seized the cocoon in its mouth, and carried Garrett out of the cave into the sunlight. For hours, seemingly, the thing carried him through a steaming forest—along wide runways in the lush grass. Garrett bobbed up and down as his captor scurried along. He was shaken about in his strange prison like a loose pea in a pod.

At length the vegetation grew sparse, and Garrett saw that he was being taken up a rocky slope. They came to a cliff of red rock, and the thing started up this as easily as a fly walks upon a wall. High up on the cliff's side the centipede entered a narrow cave. Then it started worrying at the transparent cocoon that held Garrett prisoner. But its efforts were unrewarded; the tough capsule turned the thing's jaw as easily as steel. At last the centipede gave up and rolled Garrett aside. He lay near the mouth of the cave, looking outward and downward at the scene below. The centipede came and went, but ignored him completely. To his captor, Garrett had become

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no more than the stones on the floor of the cavern.

For two long days Garrett lay there thinking before he figured out the strange workings of Nature. The wasp had made this capsule, and the only substance that could tear it open was the saliva that drooled from the mouth of the wasp's grub. Of course, a man could break it open if he had strong tools to work with, but the chances were that no man would ever find him here. Nor was there much chance of a wasp ever finding him here in a centipede's runway. As far as Nature was concerned he was a consignment of food that had failed to reach its destination.

The days and the nights passed. He thought of the Prairie Queen; of little Sanchez and big Ted Hull. And, mostly, of the Red Flowers of Tulp and their strange power. What was it they had said? "And you Buck Garrett. You shall never die."

The days and the nights passed as he lay there in his transparent prison. The shadows came leaping over the hills by morning, and slowly faced about until they marched the other way. The days and the shadows passed until they merged into each other. And still the man lay there, looking out upon the shadows that danced by, thinking of the mad prophecy of the Red Flowers of Tulp.

THE END

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WITH all of his acknowledged intellectual and literary ability and with all of his popularity with the readership of WEIRD TALES *magazine during the twenties and thirties, it is entirely possible that H. P. Lovecraft might have been confined to the nostalgic oblivion of a pulp paper grave if it had not been for the dynamism of August W. Derleth.*

Following Lovecraft's death, August Derleth, together with science fiction author Donald Wandrei, decided to gather a memorial collection of the best of H. P. Lovecraft and attempt to get it book publication. None of the general publishers were interested in taking on what amounted to a veritable omnibus by a literary "unknown," so, literally mortgaging his home and his future earnings, Derleth organized his own publishing company, Arkham House, and issued The Outsider and Others, *a handsomely printed and bound compilation of the best of H. P. Lovecraft. Eventually, Arkham House published everything of Lovecraft's but his letters.*

However, Derleth's contributions did not end there. His aggressive promotion obtained for Lovecraft paper-backed printings, low-priced hard-cover editions, armed service editions, inclusion in dozen of anthologies, radio dramatizations as well as

Illustrator
ADKINS

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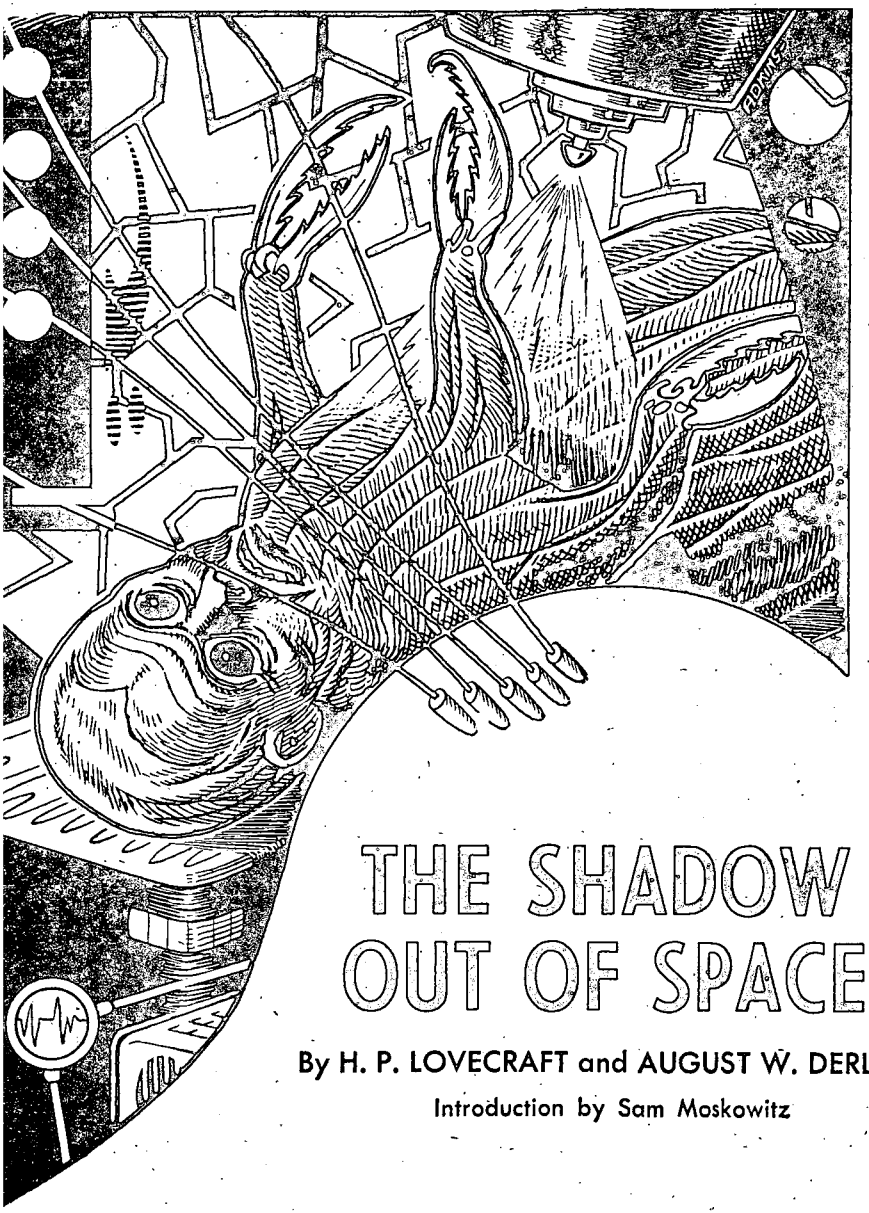

THE SHADOW OUT OF SPACE

By H. P. LOVECRAFT and AUGUST W. DERLETH

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

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the publication of many volumes of biography, bibliography and criticism. Cumulatively, all this built a pressure which forced a place for Lovecraft among the true greats of fantasy fiction.

It would seem that in all the foregoing, Derleth had infinitely repaid the time taken by H. P. Lovecraft to encourage him when he was a beginning author. However, this labor of literary love did not end there. Derleth assembled Lovecraft's outlines and notes and proceeded to finish those stories which his mentor had not lived to complete. In doing this, he had no pecuniary reward in mind for he collected seven such tales in a volume which he published at his own expense titled The Survivor *and* Others *by H. P. Lovecraft and August W. Derleth (Arkham House, Sauk City, Wis., $3.00). Only two of the stories were ever published elsewhere and the book, which appeared in 1957, was published in a limited edition of 2,000 copies.*

Among the tales in this volume, The Shadow Out of Space *is certainly one of the most unusual and calculated to delight the Lovecraft fan. It is in a deliberate sense a parallel of Lovecraft's famous masterpiece of science fiction* The Shadow Out of Time. *Derleth took discarded notes and ideas which appeared to have been originally intended for incorporation into* The Shadow Out of Time *and wove from them this story. Here again are the primary elements of the Cthulhu mythos, the Great races, strange books, distortions in space and time, the remarkable city of Arkham, the Devil reef of Innsmouth. This is old home week for Lovecraft fans who will find that old Doc Derleth's Arkham Brand patent medicine will float them back to the strange universe that died with the death of its dreamer.*

"The most merciful thing in the world . . . is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on an island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far . . ."

IF it is true that man lives forever on the edge of an abyss, then certainly most men must experience moments of awareness—of a kind of precognition, as it were—when the vast, unplumbed depths which exist forever on the rim of man's little world become for one cataclysmic moment tangible, when the terrible, boundless well of knowledge of which even the most brilliant man has only tasted, assumes a shadowy being capable of striking the most primal terror into even the stoutest

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heart. Does any living man know the true beginnings of mankind? Or man's place in the cosmos? Or whether man is doomed to the worm's ignominious end?

There are terrors that walk the corridors of sleep each night, that haunt the world of dream, terrors which may indeed be tenuously bound to the more mundane aspects of daily life. Increasingly, I have known such an awareness of a world outside this world—coterminous, perhaps, yet not impossibly completely hallucinatory. Yet it was not always so. It was not so until I met Amos Piper.

MY name is Nathanial Corey. I have been in the practise of psychoanalysis for more than fifty years. I am the author of one textbook and uncounted monographs published in the journals devoted to such learned papers. I practised for many years in Boston, after studying in Vienna, and only within the last decade, in semi-retirement, removed to the university town of Arkham, in the same state. I have a hard-earned reputation for integrity, which I fear this paper may seem to challenge. I pray that it may do more than that.

It is a steadily disturbing sense of premonition that drives me at last to setting down some record of what is perhaps the most interesting and provocative problem I have faced in all my years of practise. I am not in the habit of making public statements regarding my patients, but I am forced by the peculiar circumstances attending the case of Amos Piper to set forth certain facts, which, in the light of other, seemingly unrelated data, may quite possibly assume a greater importance than they appeared to have when first I made their acquaintance. There are powers of the mind which are shrouded in darkness, and perhaps also there are powers in darkness beyond the mind—not witches and warlocks, not ghosts and goblins, or any such desiderata of primitive civilizations, but powers infinitely more vast and terrible, beyond the concept of most men.

The name of Amos Piper will not be unfamiliar to many people, particularly to those who recall the publication of anthropological papers bearing his byline a decade or more ago. I met him for the first time when his sister, Abigail, brought him to my office one day in 1933. He was a tall man who had the look of once having been fleshy, but upon whose large-boned frame the clothes now hung as if he had lost much weight in a comparatively short time. Indeed, this proved to be the case, for,

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while Piper seemed to need medical attention far more than the services of a psychoanalyst, his sister explained that he had sought out the best medical care, and one and all the doctors he had seen had concluded that his trouble was primarily mental and beyond their curative powers. Several of my colleagues had recommended me to Miss Piper, and at the same time some of Piper's fellow savants on the faculty of Miskatonic University had added their commendations to those of the medical counsel Piper had sought out, hence the coming of the Pipers to fulfil an appointment.

Miss Piper prepared me a little with her statement of her brother's problem, while he was composing himself in my consultation room. She set forth with admirable succinctness. Piper appeared to be the victim of certain terrifying hallucinations, which took the shape of visions whenever he closed his eyes or lowered his eyelids while in a waking state, and of dreams when he slept. He had not slept, however, for three weeks, during which time he had lost so much weight that both of them had become profoundly alarmed at his condition. As prelude, Miss Piper recalled to my mind that her brother had suffered a nervous collapse while at the theatre three years before; this collapse had been of such duration that it was actually only for the past month that Piper had seemed once more to have become his normal self. His new obsession—if such it was—had begun scarcely a week after his return to normal; it seemed to Miss Piper that there might be some logical connection between his former state and this occurrence following a brief normalcy. Drugs had proved successful in inducing sleep, but even they had not eliminated the dreams, which seemed to Dr. Piper to be of a peculiarly horrible nature, so much so that he hesitated to speak of them.

MISS Piper answered frankly such questions as I asked her, but betrayed the lack of any real knowledge of her brother's condition. She assured me that he had never been violent at any time, but he was frequently distrait and apparently separated from the world in which he lived, with a manifest line of demarcation, as if he existed in a shell enclosing him from the world.

After Miss Piper took her leave, I looked in on my patient. I found him sitting wide-eyed beside my desk. His eyes had an hypnotic quality, and appeared to be held open by force of will, for the eyeballs were extremely bloodshot, and the irises seemed

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to be clouded. He was in an agitated condition, and began at once to apologize for being there, explaining that his sister's determined insistence had left him no recourse but to yield to her. He was all the more unwilling to heed her demands because he knew that nothing could be done for him.

I told him that Miss Abigail had briefly outlined his trouble, and sought to calm his fears. I spoke soothingly in generalized terms. Piper listened with patient respect, apparently yielding to the casual yet reassuring manner with which I have always sought to inspire confidence, and when at last I asked why he could not close his eyes, he answered without hesitation, and quite simply, that he was afraid to do so.

"Why?" I wanted to know. "Can you say—if you will?"

I remember his reply. "The moment I close my eyes, there appear on the retina strange geometrical figures and designs, together with vague lights and even more sinister shapes beyond, as of great creatures past the conception of mankind—and the most frightening thing about them is that they are creatures of intelligence—immeasurably alien."

I urged him then to make an attempt to describe these beings. He found it difficult to do so. His descriptions were vague, but startling in what they suggested. None of his beings seemed clearly formed, except for certain rugose cones which might as readily have been vegetable in origin as animal. Yet he spoke with such conviction, striving to limn for me the astonishing creatures of which he dreamed so insistently, that I was struck by the vividness of Piper's imagination. Perhaps there was a connection between these visions and the long illness which had beset him? Of this he was reluctant to speak, but after a while he began to go back to it, somewhat uncertainly, speaking of it disconnectedly, so that it was left for me to piece together the sequence of events.

HIS story began properly in his forty-ninth year. This was when his illness came upon him. He had been attending a performance of Maugham's *The Letter* when, in the middle of the second act, he had fainted. He had been carried to the manager's office, and efforts were there made to revive him. These were futile, and finally he was removed to his home by police ambulance; there medical men spent some further hours in an attempt to bring him to. As a result of their failure, Piper was hospitalized. He lay in a comatose state for three days, at the

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end of which he returned to consciousness.

IT was immediately observed, however, that he was "not himself." His personality seemed to have suffered a profound disorientation. It was at first believed by his medical attendants that he had been the victim of a stroke of some kind, but this theory was reluctantly abandoned for lack of corroborative symptoms. So profound was his ailment that some of the most ordinary acts of man were performed by him with the utmost difficulty. For instance, it was noticed at once that he seemed to have difficulty grasping objects; yet nothing seemed wrong with his physical structure and his articulation appeared to be normal. His approach in grasping things was not that of a creature with fingers, but a motion of opening fingers and thumb as if to pick up and handle objects without finger mobility, in a motion that was clawlike rather than manual. Nor was this the only aspect of his disturbing "recovery." He had to learn to walk all over again, for he seemed to attempt to inch along as if he had no locomotive power. He had, too, a most extraordinary difficulty in learning to speak; his first attempts to do so were made with his hands, in the same claw-like motion with which he sought to grasp objects; at the same time, he made curious whistling sounds, the meaninglessness of which visibly troubled him. Yet it was perceived that his intelligence did not appear to have suffered any impairment, for he learned rapidly, and in a week's time he had mastered all those prosaic acts which are part of any man's daily life.

BUT, if his intelligence had not been impaired, his memory for the events of his life had been all but wiped out. He had not recognized his sister, nor had he known any of his fellow faculty members on the staff at Miskatonic University. He professed to know nothing of Arkham, of Massachusetts, and but little of the United States. It was necessary to make all this knowledge available to him anew, though it was only a short time —less than a month—before he had assimilated all that had been put before him, rediscovering human knowledge in an amazingly brief time, and manifesting a phenomenally accurate memory of everything he had been told and had read. Indeed, if anything, his memory during his illness—once indoctrination had been completed—was infinitely superior to the functioning of that part of his mind before.

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IT was only after Piper had made these necessary adjustments to his situation that he began to follow what he himself described as "an inexplicable" course of action. He was on indefinite leave from Miskatonic University, and he began to travel extensively. Yet he had no direct and personal knowledge of these travels at the time of his visit to my office, or at any time since his "recovery" from the illness which had afflicted him for three years. There was nothing remotely resembling memory in his account of these travels, and what he did on these journeys he did not know; this was extraordinary, in view of the astounding memory he had displayed during that illness. He had been told since his "recovery" that he had gone to strange, out-of-the-way places on the globe—the Arabian desert, the fastnesses of Inner Mongolia, the Arctic Circle, the Polynesian Islands, the Marquesas, the ancient Inca country of Peru, and the like. Of what he did there he had no recollection whatever, nor was there anything in his luggage to show, save for one or two curious scraps of what might have been antique hieroglyphic writings, most of them on stone, such as any tourist might be interested in adding to a small collection.

When not engaged on these mysterious journeys, he had spent his time reading very widely, and with almost inconceivable rapidity at the great libraries of the world. Beginning with that of Miskatonic University in Arkham—one well known for certain forbidden manuscripts and books gradually accumulated over a period of centuries begun in colonial times—he had ranged as far as Cairo, Egypt, in such studies, though he had spent most of his time at the British Museum in London and the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. He had consulted innumerable private libraries, wherever he could gain admittance.

In every case, the records which he had subsequently troubled to check in that single brief week of his "normalcy"—using every available means: cablegram, wireless, radio, in the sense of urgency which, he said, impelled him—showed that he had read avidly of certain very old books, of but a few of which he had had only the remotest knowledge prior to the onset of his illness. They were such books related to ancient lore as the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, the *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of Von Junzt, the Comte d'Erlette's *Cultes des Goules*, Ludvig Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis*, the *R'lyeh Text*, the *Seven Cryptical Books of*

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Hsan, the *Dhol Chants*, the *Liber Ivoris*, the *Celaeno Fragments*, and many others, similar texts, some of which existed only in fragmentary form, all of which were scattered over the globe. Of course, there was also a leavening of history, but it was to be noted, according to the records of withdrawals in such libraries as Piper had been able to check, that reading in any given library had always begun with books accounted legendry and supernatural lore, and from them progressed into studies of history and anthropology, in a direct progression, as if Piper assumed that the history of mankind began not with ancient times but with the incredibly old world which existed before man's measured time as known to historians, and which was written about in certain dreaded and terrible lore to be found only in eldritch books held of an occult nature.

HE was also known to have made contacts with other persons with whom he had had no prior acquaintance, but whom he now met as by prearrangement at various places, persons of similar pursuits, also engaged in somewhat macabre research, or affiliated with the faculty of some college or university. Yet there had been always one affinity among them, as Piper had learned by dint of telephoning across oceans and continents to people whose communications he found among his papers when he had returned to "normalcy"—each of them had suffered a seizure either identical with or very similar in nature to that which had come upon Piper at the theatre.

Though this course of action was not related to Piper's way of life before the illness came upon him, it remained fairly consistent for the duration of that illness, once it had been set. The strange and unaccountable trips he had undertaken soon after he had once again accustomed himself to living among his fellowmen after his initial "recovery" had continued throughout the three years he had been "not himself." Two months at Ponape, a month at Angkor-Vat, three months in Antarctica, a conference with a fellow-savant in Paris, and only brief periods in Arkham between journeys; such was the pattern of his life, this was the way in which he had spent the three years prior to full and complete recovery, which in turn had been followed by another period of profound displacement, which permitted Amos Piper no memory of what he had done during those three years, and subjected him to a dread of closing his eyes lest he see that which suggested to his

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subconscious mind something awe-inspiring and terrible, coupled with his dreams.

II

IT was only after three visits that I managed to persuade Amos Piper to set down for me a sequence of his strangely vivid dreams, those nocturnal adventures of his subconscious mind which troubled him and disturbed him so deeply. They were very similar to one another in nature, and each of them was unconnected and fragmentary, since none had any transitional phase from waking to dream. Yet, in the light of Piper's illness, they were challengingly significant. The most common of them was a repetitive dream of place; this, in one variation or another, occurred repeatedly in the sequence which Piper set down. I reproduce here his own account of the repetitive dream.

"I was a scholar at work in a library in a colossal building. The room in which I sat transcribing something in a book in a language which was not English was so large that the tables in it were as high as an ordinary room. The walls were not of wood, but of basalt, though the shelves which lined the walls were of a kind of dark wood I did not know. The books were not printed, but entirely in holograph, many of them written in the same strange language which I wrote. But there were some which were in recognizable languages—this recognition, however, seemed to spring from an ancestral memory—in Sanscrit, Greek, Latin, French—even English, but English of much variation, from the time of Piers Plowman to our own time. The tables were lit with large globes of luminous crystal together with strange machines made of vitreous tubes and metal rods, without connecting wires.

"Apart from the books on the shelves, there was an austere barrenness about the place. The exposed stonework showed some odd carvings, invariably in curvilinear mathematical designs, together with inscriptions in the same hieroglyphs which were written in the books. The masonry was megalithic; convex-topped blocks fitted the concave-bottomed courses which rested upon them; and all rose from a floor composed of great octagonal flagstones of a similar basalt. Nothing was hung upon the walls, and nothing decorated the floors. The shelves rose from floor to ceiling, and between the walls were only the tables at which we worked at a standing position, since nothing resembling chairs was in evidence, nor was the inclination to sit down felt.

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"By day I could see outside a vast forest of fernlike trees. By night I could look upon the stars, but none was recognizable; no single constellation of those skies even remotely resembled the familiar stars which were the nocturnal companions of Earth. This filled me with terror, for I knew that I was in an utterly alien place, far removed from the terrestrial surroundings I had once known, and which now seemed a memory of an incredibly far existence. Yet I knew that I was an integral part of all this, and at one and the same time wholly distinct from it; or, as if part of me belonged to this milieu, and part did not. I was very much confused, and all the more so to recognize that the material I was writing was nothing more or less than a history of Earth of a time I believed was one I had lived—that is, the twentieth century; I was setting this down in the minutest detail, as if for study, but I knew not for what purpose, save to add to the tremendous accumulation of knowledge already in those countless books in the room in which I sat as well as in adjoining rooms, for the entire building of which this room was but one was a vast storehouse of knowledge. Nor was it the only one, for I knew from such conversation as went on around me that there were others far removed, and that in them all there were other writers such as us, similarly engaged, and that the work we were doing was vital to the return of the Great Race—which was the race to which we belonged—to the places in the universes which had once, aeons gone by, served us as home until the war with the Ancient Ones had forced us into flight.

I WORKED always under great fear and an inspired terror. I was afraid to look at myself. There was omnipresent a lurking fear that some hideous discovery was implicit in even the most fleeting glance at my body, which sprang from the conviction that I had stolen such a glance at some past time and had been profoundly frightened at sight of myself. Perhaps I feared that I was like the others, for my fellow-workers were all around me, and all were alike. They were great rugose cones, resembling a vegetable in structure, more than ten feet in height, with heads and claw-like hands attached to thick limbs which were ringed around the apex of their bodies. They walked by expanding and contracting the viscous layer attached to their bases, and, though they did not speak a language I recognized, yet I was able to understand the sounds

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they made because, as I knew in my dream, I had been instructed in that language from the moment of my arrival at that place. They did not speak with anything that resembled a human voice at all, nor did I, rather by a combination of strange whistlings and the clicking or scraping of huge claws attached to the end of two of their four limbs, which radiated from what supposedly would have been their necks, save that no such part of their bodies was visible.

"Part of my fear arose from the dim understanding that I was a prisoner within a prisoner, that even as I was imprisoned within a body similar to those around me, so this body was imprisoned within the great library. I sought in vain for any familiar thing. Nothing was there to suggest the Earth I had known since childhood, and everything hinted at a point far out in space as that which we now occupied. I understood that all my fellow-workers were captives of some kind, too, though there were occasional appearances by warders who, though they were similar in form to the others, nevertheless, wore an air of authority, and came walking among us, often to assist us. These warders were not menacing, but courteous, if firm.

"Though our warders were not supposed to engage us in conversation, there was one among them who was under no restrictions. He was evidently an instructor, and moved among us with more importance than the others, and I noticed that even the other warders deferred to him. This was not alone because he was an instructor, but also because he was held to be doomed, for the Great Race was not yet ready to move, and the body he inhabited was destined to die before the migration would take place. He had known other men, and he was in the habit of stopping at my table—at first with only a few words of encouragement, but finally to talk for longer periods of time.

FROM him I learned that the Great Race had existed on Earth and on other planets of our own universe as well as those of others, billions of years before recorded history. The rugose cones which made their present form had been occupied for only a few centuries, and were far from their true form, which was more kin to a shaft of light, for they were a race of free minds, capable of invading any body and displacing the mind which inhabited it. They had occupied Earth until they had become involved in the titanic struggle between the Elder Gods and the Ancient Ones for the domination of the cosmos, a

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truggle which, he told me, accounted for the Christian Myhos among mankind, for the imple minds of early men had onceived of their ancestral nemories of this struggle as one etween elemental Good and elenental Evil. From Earth, the reat Race had fled outward into pace, at first to the planet Jupier, and then farther, to that tar on which they now were, a lark star in Taurus, where they emained ever watchful for inasion from the region of the ake of Hali, which was the lace of banishment for Hastur f the Ancient Ones, after the lefeat of the Ancient Ones by he Elder Gods. But now their tar was dying, and they were reparing for a mass migration o another star, either backward r forward in time, and for the ccupation of the bodies of creatures more long-lived than the ugose cones which now afforded hem housing.

"Their preparation consisted f the displacing of minds of reatures who existed at various imes and in many places among he universes. There were among ny companions, he asserted, not nly tree-men from Venus, but lso members of the half-vegetale race of paleogean Antarctica; ot only representative of the reat Inca civilization of Peru, ut also members of the race of nen who were to live on post-atomic earth, horribly altered by mutations caused by the fall-out of radioactive materials from the hydrogen and cobalt bombs of the atomic wars; not only ant-like beings from Mars, but also men from ancient Rome and men from a world fifty thousand years in the future. There were countless others from all races, from all walks of life, from worlds I knew and from worlds separated from my time by thousands upon thousands of years. For the Great Race could travel at will in time or space, and the rugose cones which now constituted their bodies were but a temporary dwelling, briefer than most, and the place where they now carried on their vast researches, filling their archives with the history of life in all time and all places, was for them but a short residence before they went on to a newer and continuing existence elsewhere, in some other form, on some other world.

ALL of us who worked in the great library were assisting in the gathering of the archives, for each of us wrote the history of his own time. By sending their members forth into the void, the Great Race could both see for itself what life was like in other times and places, and achieve an account of it in terms of the beings who lived then and

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there, for these were the minds which had been sent back to take the place of the missing members of the Great Race until such time as they were ready to return. The Great Race had built a machine which aided them in their flight through time and space, but it was not such a machine as had been crudely imagined by mankind, but rather one that operated on the body to separate and project the mind; and whenever a journey forward or backward in time was contemplated, the voyager submitted to the machine and the project was accomplished. Then, wherever they went in mass migration, they went unfettered; all the appurtenances, the artifacts, the inventions, even the great library would be left behind; the Great Race would begin again to build its civilization, always hoping to escape the holocaust which would come about when the Ancient Ones—great Hastur, the Unspeakable; and Cthulhu, who lies in the watery depths; and Nyarlathotep, the Messenger; and Azathoth and Yog-Sothoth and all their terrible progeny—escaped their bondage and joined again in titanic battle with the Elder Gods among distant stars."

THIS was Piper's most recurrent dream. Actually, it was very probably not a continuing dream in the sense that it took place at one time, but rather one which was repeated, adding details, until the final version which he had set down seemed to him one repetitive dream, when in truth it had been cumulative, adding details with each recurrence. The pattern of his actions on his brief period of "normalcy" in relation to the dream was significant, for it represented a signal reversal of the proper order—in life he imitated the actions of what he later described as rugose cones inhabitating dreams which came subsequently into peripheral existence. The order should have been, normally, reversed to this; had his actions—his attempts to grasp objects as with claws, and to speak with his hands, and so—taken place after the occurrence of these vivid dreams, the normal progression would have been observed. It was significant that it did not happen in this manner.

A second recurring dream appeared to be merely an appendage to his first. Once more Piper was at work at the high table in the great library, unable to sit because there were no chairs and because the rugose cone was not meant to sit. Once again the doomed instructor had stopped to talk with him, and Piper had questioned him about the life of the Great Race.

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"I asked him how the Great Race could hope to keep secret its plans, if it replaced the displaced minds. He said this would be done in two ways. First, all trace of memory of this place would be carefully expunged before any displaced mind was returned, whether it were sent back or forward in time and space. Second, if traces remained, they were likely to be so diffuse and unconnected as to be meaningless, and, if something could be pieced together from them, it would seem so incredible to others as to be considered the workings of an overwrought imagination, if not, indeed, illness.

"He went on to tell me that the minds of the Great Race were permitted to select their habitats. They were not sent forth haphazardly to occupy the first 'dwellings' to which they came, but had the power of choosing among the creatures they saw which they would occupy. The mind so displaced would be sent back to the present home of the Great Race, while the member of that race who had gone forth would adjust himself to the life of the civilization to which he had gone until he had sought out the traces of the aeon-old culture which had culminated in the great upheaval between the Elder Gods and the Ancient Ones. Even after the return had been effected, and the Great Race had learned all it wished to learn of the ways of life and of the points of contact with the Ancient Ones, particularly of their minions who might oppose the Great Race, whose members had always striven for solitude and peace, but who were more closely akin to the Elder Gods than to the Ancient Ones, there were times when minds were sent out to make sure that the displaced minds had been washed clear of memory, and to reclaim them by effecting another displacement if they had not.

HE took me into the subterranean rooms of the great library. There were books everywhere, all in holograph. Cases of them were stored in tiers of rectangular vaults wrought of some unknown lustrous metal. The archives were arranged in the order of life forms, and I took note of the fact that the rugose creatures of the dark star were held to be of a higher order than man, for the race of man was not very far from the reptilian orders which immediately preceded it on Earth. When asked about this, the instructor confirmed that it was so. He explained that contact with Earth was maintained only because it had once been the center of the great battleground between the Elder

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Gods and the Ancient Ones, and the minions of the latter existed there unknown to most men—the Deep Ones in the ocean depths, the batrachian people of Polynesia and the Innsmouth country of Massachusetts, the dreaded Tcho-Tcho people of Tibet, the shantaks of Kadath in the Cold Waste, and many others, and because it might now be necessary for the Great Race to retreat once more to that green planet which had first been their home. Only yesterday, he said—a time which seemed infinitely long ago, for the length of the days and nights was equivalent to a week on Earth—one of the minds had returned from Mars and reported that that planet was farther along the way toward death even than their own star, and thus one more prospective haven had been lost.

"From these subterranean reaches, he took me to the top of the building. This was a great tower domed in a substance like glass, from which I could look out over the landscape below. I saw then that the forest of fern-like trees which I had seen was of dried green leaves, not fresh, and that, far from the edge of the forest stretched an interminable desert which descended into a dark gulf, which, my guide explained, was the dried bed of a great ocean. The dark star had come within the outermost orbit of a nova and was now slowly and surely dying. How strange indeed that landscape looked! The trees were stunted, in comparison to the great building of megalithic stone out of which we peered; no bird flew across that grey heaven; no cloud was there; no mist hung above the abyss; and the light of the distant sun which illuminated the dark star came indirectly out of space, so that the landscape was bathed forever in a grey unreality.

"I shuddered to look upon it".

PIPER's dreams grew steadily more fraught with fright. This fear seemed to exist on two planes—one which bound him to Earth, another which bound him to the dark star. There was seldom much variation. A secondary theme which occurred two or three times in his dream sequence was that of being permitted to accompany the instructor-warder to a curious circular room which must have been at the very bottom of the colossal tower. In each such case one of their number was stretched out upon a table between glittering domes of a machine which shone a blinking and wavering light as if it were of some kind of electricity, though, as with the lamps on the work-tables, there were no wires.

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As the light pulsations increased and brightened, the rugose cone on the table became comatose and remained so for some time, until the light wavered and the hum of the machine failed. Then the cone came to life once more, and immediately began an excited jabbering of whistling and clicking sounds. This scene was invariable. Piper understood what was being said, and he believed that what he had witnessed in each case was the return of a mind belonging to the Great Race, and the sending back of the displaced mind which had occupied the rugose cone in its absence. The substance of the rapid talk of the revived cone was always quite similar; it amounted to a report in summary of the great mind's sojourn away from the dark star. In one instance the great mind had just come back from Earth after five years as a British anthropologist, and he pretended to have himself seen the places where the minions of the Ancient Ones lay in wait. Some had been partially destroyed—as, for instance, were a certain island not far from Ponape, in the Pacific, and Devil Reef off Innsmouth, and a mountain cavern and pool near Machu Pichu—but other minions were widespread, with no organization, and the Ancient Ones who remained on Earth were imprisoned under the five-pointed star which was the seal of the Elder Gods. Of the places which were reported potentially future homes for the Great Race, Earth was always a leading contender, despite the danger of atomic war.

It was clear, in the progression of Piper's dreams, despite their confusion, that the Great Race contemplated flight to some planet of star far distant from the dying star which they occupied, and that vast regions of the green planet where few men lived—places covered with ice, great sandy regions in the hot countries—offered a haven to the Great Race. Basically, Piper's dreams were all very similar. Always there was the vast structure of megalithic basalt blocks, always the interminable working by those peculiar beings who had no need of sleep, invariably the feeling of imprisonment, and, in real life concomitantly the omnipresent fear of which Piper could not shake himself free.

I concluded that Piper was the victim of a very deep confusion, unable to relate dream to reality, one of those unhappy men who could no longer know which was the real world—that of his dreams or that in which he walked and talked by day. But even in this conclusion I was not wholly satisfied, and how right I

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was to question my judgement I was soon to learn.

III

AMOS Piper was my patient for a period just short of three weeks. I observed in him throughout that time, however much to my dismay and to the discredit of such treatment, as I attempted, a steady deterioration in his condition. Hallucinatory data—or what I took to be such—began to make their appearance, particularly in the development of the typical paranoid delusions of being followed and watched. This develoment reached its climax in a letter Piper wrote to me and sent by the hand of a messenger. It was a letter obviously written in great haste . . .

"Dear Dr. Corey, Because I may not see you again, I want to tell you that I am no longer in any doubt about my position. I am satisfied that I have been under observation for some time—not by any terrestrial being, but by one of the minds of the Great Race—for I am now convinced that all my visions and all my dreams derive from that three-year period when I was displaced—or 'not myself,' as my sister would put it. The Great Race exists apart from my dreams. It has existed for longer than mankind's measure of time. I do not know where they are—whether in the dark star in Taurus or farther away. But they are preparing to move again, and one of them is nearby.

"I have not been idle between visits to your office. I have had time to make some further private inquiries of my own. Many connecting links to my dreams have alarmed and baffled me. What, for instance, actually happened at Innsmouth in 1928 that caused the federal government to drop depth charges off Devil Reef in the Atlantic coast just out of that city? What was it in that seacoast town that brought about the arrest and subsequent banishing of half the citizenry? And what was the connecting link between the Polynesians and the people of Innsmouth? Too, what was it that the Miskatonic Antarctic Expedition of 1930-31 discovered at the Mountains of Madness, of such a nature that it had to be kept quiet and secret from all the world except the savants at the university? What other explanation is there for the Johannsen narrative but a corroborative account of the legendry of the Great Race? And does this not also exist in the ancient lore of the Inca and Aztec nations?

"I could go for many pages, but there is no time. I discovered scores of such subtly disturbing related incidents, most of them

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hushed up, kept secret, suppressed, lest they disturb an already sorely troubled world. Man, after all, is only a brief manifestation on the face of but a single planet in only one of the vast universes which fill all space. Only the Great Race knows the secret of eternal life, moving through space and time, occupying one habitation after another, becoming animal or vegetable or insect, as the circumstances demand.

"I must hurry—I have so little time. Believe me, my dear doctor, I know whereof I write . . ."

I WAS not, in view of this letter, particularly surprised to learn from Miss Abigail Piper that her brother had suffered a "relapse" within a few hours, apparently, of the writing of this letter. I hastened to the Piper home only to be met at the door by my one-time patient. But he was now completely changed.

He presented to me a self-assurance he had not shown in my consultation room or at any time since first I had met him. He assured me that he had won control of himself at last, that the visions to which he had been subjected had vanished, and that he could now sleep free of the disturbing dreams which had so troubled him. Indeed, I could not doubt that he had made a recovery, and I was at a loss to understand why Miss Piper should have written me that frantic note, unless she had become so accustomed to her brother in his disoriented state that she had mistaken his improvement for a "relapse". This recovery was all the more remarkable since every evidence—his increasing fears, his hallucinations, his mounting nervousness, and, finally, his hasty letter—combined to indicate, as surely as any physical symptom ever did a disease, a collapse of what remained of his sanity.

I was pleased with his recovery, and congratulated him. He accepted my congratulations with a faint smile, and then excused himself, saying that there was much for him to do. I promised to call once again in a week or so, to watch against any return of the earlier symptoms of his distressed state.

Ten days later I called on him for the last time. I found him affable and courteous. Miss Abigail Piper was present, somewhat distraught, but uncomplaining. Piper had had no further dreams or visions, and was able to talk quite frankly of his "illness," deprecating any mention of "disorientation" or "displacement" with an insistence that I could interpret only as great anxiety that I should not retain such impressions. I spent a very pleasant hour with him;

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but I could not escape the conviction that whereas the troubled man I had known in my office was a man of matching intelligence, the "recovered" Amos Piper was a man of far vaster intelligence than my own.

At the time of my visit, he impressed me with the fact that he was making ready to join an expedition to the Arabian desert country. I did not then think of relating his plans to the curious journeys he had made during the three years of his illness. But subsequent happenings brought this forcibly to mind.

TWO nights later, my office was entered and rifled. All the original documents pertaining to the problem of Amos Piper were removed from my files. Fortunately, impelled by an intuition for which I could not account, I had had presence of mind enough to make copies of the most important of his dream accounts, as well as of the letter he had written me at the end, for this, too, was removed. Since these documents could have had no meaning or value to anyone but Amos Piper, and since Piper was now presumably cured of his obsession, the only conclusion that presented itself in explanation of this strange robbery was in itself so bizarre that I was reluctant to entertain it. Moreover, I ascertained that Piper departed on his journey on the following day, establishing the possibility in addition to the probability of his having been the instrument—I write "instrument" advisedly—of the theft.

But a recovered Piper would have no valid desire for the return of the data. On the other hand, a "relapsed" Piper would have every reason to want these papers destroyed. Had Piper, then, suffered a second disorientation, one which was this time not obvious, since the mind displacing his would have no need to accustom itself again to the habits and thought-patterns of man?

However incredible this hypothesis, I acted on it by initiating some inquiries of my own. I intended originally to spend a week—possibly a fortnight—in pursuit of the answers to some of the questions Amos Piper had put to me in his last letter. But weeks were not enough; the time stretched into months, and by the end of the year, I was more perplexed than ever. More, I trembled on the edge of that same abyss which had haunted Piper.

For something had indeed taken place at Innsmouth in 1928, something which had involved the federal government at last, and about which nothing but the most vaguely terrifying hints of a connection to certain

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batrachian people of Ponape—none of this official—ever seeped out. And there were oddly disquieting discoveries made at some of the ancient temples at Angkor-Vat, discoveries which were linked to the culture of the Polynesians as well as to that of certain Indian tribes of Northwestern America, and to certain other discoveries made at the Mountains of Madness by an expedition from Miskatonic University.

THERE were scores of similar related incidents, all shrouded in mystery and silence. And the books — the forbidden books Amos Piper had consulted—these were at the library of Miskatonic University, and what was in such pages as I read was hideously suggestive in the light of all Amos Piper had said, and all I had subsequently confirmed. What was there set forth, however indirectly, was that somewhere there did exist a race of infinitely superior beings—call them gods or the Great Race or any other name—who could indeed send their free minds across time and space. And if this were accepted as a premise, then it could also be true that Amos Piper's mind had once again been displaced by that mind of the Great Race sent to find out whether all memory of his stay among them had been expunged.

But perhaps the most damningly disturbing facts of all have only gradually come to light. I took the trouble to look up everything I could discover about the members of the expedition to the Arabian desert which Amos Piper had joined. They came from all corners of the earth, and were all men who might be expected to show an interest in an expedition of that nature—a British anthropologist, a French Palentologist, a Chinese scholar, an Egyptologist—there were many more. And I learned that each of them, like Amos Piper, had some time within the past decade suffered some kind of seizure, variously described, but which was undeniably a personality displacement precisely the same as Piper's.

Somewhere in the remote wastes of the Arabian desert, the entire expedition vanished from the face of the earth!

* * *

PERHAPS it was inevitable that my persistent inquiries should stir interest in quarters beyond my reach. Yesterday, a patient came to my office. There was that in his eyes which made me to think of Amos Piper, when last I saw him—a patronizing, aloof superiority, which made me cringe mentally, together with a certain awkwardness of the

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hands And last night I saw him again, passing under the street-light across from the house. Once more this morning, like a man studying another's every habit for some reason too devious for his intended victim to know.

And now, coming across the street . . .

* * *

The scattered pages of the above manuscript were found on the floor of Dr. Nathaniel Corey's office, when his resident nurse summoned police as a result of an alarming disturbance behind the locked door of the office. When the police broke in, Dr. Corey and an unidentified patient were found on their knees on the floor, both trying vainly to push the sheets of paper toward the flames of the fireplace in the north wall of the room.

The two men seemed unable to grasp the pages, but were nudging them forward with strange, crab-like motions. They were oblivious of the police, and were bent only on the destruction of the manuscript, continuing their unnatural efforts toward that end with a frenzied haste. Neither man was able to give an intelligent account of himself to the police or to medical attendants, nor was either even coherent in what he did say.

Since, after competent examination, both appeared to have suffered a profound personality displacement, they have been removed for indefinite confinement in the Larkin Institute, the well-known private asylum for the insane . . . **THE END**

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WHAT IF?

BY WILLIAM W. STUART

Illustrator ADKINS

Decisions, decisions. Do they burden you? Do you worry about them, and how they will affect you? Then imagine how young Dibbit felt—for his decisions affected everybody, everywhere, forever.

SOME people have a natural talent for music, for color, form, shape, design. There are born talkers, dancers, legal minds, scientists, business men and ribbon clerks. Almost everyone has some ability. What he achieves with it is a matter of degree—and of decision.

Even George Dibbit must have had something. He was a very intelligent, sensitive boy. But if George was fitted for anything in this world it was only something approximating a life-sentence in some secure, strict but reasonably comfortable prison; or, perhaps, life as a free citizen of an iron curtain democracy.

He did have a talent which was an outstanding ability to look ahead, examine all sides of any given situation and visualize a variety of possible courses of action and their probable results. His trouble was inability to face those results. No course was perfect. His mind would cast about in agonies of indecision, seeking a better way. He could rarely decide on anything. The responsibility for what might happen was too great. If he could only know . . .

An iron-willed mother, a succession of strict schools and a thoroughly routine, regulation ridden clerical job with the Department of Internal Revenue got him through his first thirty years. From the time in the morning when mother said,

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"Time to get up, Georgie-boy," till she told him, "better get our beauty rest, Georgie," every move was governed by instruction, advice, order or regulation.

But when Georgie was thirty, mother died. He needed, desperately, some strong-minded spinster standing by, ready to grab hold and take over. But mother, selfishly perhaps, had failed to provide. Given time, one surely would have turned up. But for George Dibbit, the interval of non-direction between mother and Mrs. was too great to span and he went down in it.

The immediate shock of mother's passing he withstood fairly well. The firmly sympathetic, (black) velvet-gentle, strong hand of Mr. Samuel Unger, Funeral Director and Family Friend, directed everything—Mr. Unger—"just call me Uncle Sammy, George Old Boy"—saw George very nicely through the first trying days and weeks and the most of his modest inheritance.

But then, all too soon, it was time to get back to normal living, back to work: and, of course, there were decisions and decisions that kindly old Uncle Sammy couldn't handle for him.

What to wear? Well, mourning, naturally. That took care of that. But then, what should he eat for breakfast? Mother had kept switching from oatmeal, to grits, to soft boiled eggs and now how could he be sure what was right on any given morning? And how should he get down to work? Car or bus? Both the bus company and Mr. Heinkel at the service station had persuasive arguments. Mr. Heinkel's aggressive personality won out initially but George wasn't happy about it. The traffic—decisions, decisions and any one could be fatal for him or for someone else. A left turn at Frank St.—and a truck might stop short, a pedestrian jump, a lady driver swerve—who could say where the chain would end?

Every day George Dibbit showed up at work more nervously distraught than the one before. His hands trembled; he gnawed lips and fingernails. He suffered from hives; he was suspected of secret vices.

On each decision, he tried to visualize all the possible results so that he could make the wise, the just selection of a course to take. "What if I do leave the car and take the bus? What about that boy, Freddy at the parking lot and his tip? What if . . . . ?" He sweated and he agonized over the answer to that "What if?" If he could only be sure . . .

But then one evening he had to make a snap decision between ham and cheese. "What if?" he wondered. And then, all at once, he knew the answer. He broke.

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IT WAS April. Naturally, the department was frantically busy. The Division Head, Mr. Skinner said on Friday, "All right, boys and girls—it's overtime for everyone tonight."

It was all right with George. He loved to do what he was told.

But then, at six o'clock, Mr. Skinner had said, "I'm going to send out for coffee and sandwiches; on me, kiddies, order anything you want—just so it's ham or cheese." His eye fell on George, busily checking returns at his desk. "What'll it be, Georgie—ham? Or cheese?"

There it was, squarely up to George, and without even anyone else to order first and set a precedent. One or the other, he had to decide: ham or cheese?

"What if . . . ?" George asked himself frantically, searching his mind. And then he found the answer.

He heard himself, in his mind, ordering ham. Then little Mrs. Dennison, always so helpful, would go across the street to Arthur's. She would give the order. Arthur himself would be there, fat, smiling. He would get the ham; put it in the slicer. Zip, zip, zip, the slices; one more, for George. And then a fat cockroach would scuttle across the floor. "Oo-oh!!" Mrs. Dennison would scream. Arthur's fat head would swing around. Zip—George's slice of ham and with it the tips of four fingers of Arthur's right hand. Arthur never would use a guard on that slicer. So poor, fat Arthur would stare in shocked, unbelieving horror at his blood spouting hand. His fat heart would flutter, quiver and stop. Arthur would be dead—because he, George Dibbit had decided to say "ham." He couldn't make a decision that would result in the death of poor, inoffensive—not very offensive, anyway—Arthur.

But suppose he were to order cheese instead? Then—Mrs. Dennison knew he liked swiss cheese. Arthur was out of swiss. Mrs. Dennison, always so eager to please, would decide to run across the street while Arthur was fixing the rest of the order and get George a swiss cheese at Ciro's. She would dash out of Arthur's; a quick, careless look and she would dart out into the quiet evening street. A hurtling cab around the corner, screaming brakes—poor, crushed, crumpled little Mrs. Dennison.

"George!" snapped Mr. Skinner's voice of doom, "damnit, snap out of it, will you? What'll it be? Ham—or cheese?"

George Dibbit gave a weak little moan, tensed, stiffened and sat rigid in his chair, eyes staring, empty, blank.

It was a most unusual case. What on earth could have sent the poor boy off like that? Very

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sad thing. The ambulance was prompt and the attendants took him away, of course, but the work of the department never did get back on schedule that April.

A LITTLE over two years later Dr. E. Burton Halliwell, Director, guided a committee of the legislature through the State (Mental) Hospital. There was—there always was—the question of the biennial appropriation.

Dr. Halliwell, not in his role as dapper darling of the ladies' club lecture circuit for this occasion, but wearing his hairless old tweed, threadbare 'appropriations' suit, as he called it, was making an excellent impression. He always did. This was his talent, and he gave it full play as he showed the legislators about selected sectors of his shop.

Maximum security wards: "Frankly, gentlemen, understaffed as we so regrettably are, I say a prayer nightly for the safety of your loved ones."

Hydrotherapy, electrotherapy, drug therapy, group therapy, work therapy: "So pitifully little we can do, my friends, with the poor tools at our command. Penny wisdom in cruel fact, gentlemen. If it were only realized, the saving to the state for each patient we are able to discharge . . . ?" The tour was to end, stressing the note of future savings for investment now, with a conscience-twisting turn through a ward devoted to basic custody and care of the apparently hopelessly lost ones.

In the so-called section recreation room, up-state Representative Crabtree, a thin, sour man with a nagging yelp for a voice, a coyote bucking for the title of "watchdog of the appropriations committee," sidled up to a quiet, seated figure.

"Well, young man," he said, "you look healthy enough to me to do a day's work. How long do you intend to loaf around here at taxpayers' . . . uh." The Honorable Mr. Crabtree had moved in beside the chair and bent down for a close, accusing look at this taxpayers' burden. The stiff, frozen, wax-like face and wide open, blank, dead eyes stopped him cold. But not, of course, for long. "Hey! This one is dead. Halliwell, this one is . . . say! What are you trying to pull, Halliwell? This here is a dummy; must be made outa wax or something."

Dr. Halliwell moved up with the easy assurance of a pitchman with a genuine mermaid. "Ah, this one, poor fellow—a classic case, truly. In all my years of professional experience, the catatonic state to be so impenetrably complete, rarely have I seen." Dr. Halliwell had found just a touch of foreign flavor in his speech to be quite effective. "Ex-

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actly as you see him now, this one has been two years with us. Electric shock, drug shock—nothing, the impression has made."

"It's a dummy. It ain't alive," yelped Rep. Crabtree, on a hot scent. The other six members of the committee straggled up for a look.

Dr. Halliwell smiled with great skill, expressing both superior, professional knowledge and war sympathy. "Not alive? True; something inside has died. And yet—all of the motor functions of the organism in perfect order are. Here, sir—feel here, just here, that pulse. Strong and steady, is it not?"

Rep. Crabtree took the wrist suspiciously; dropped it almost at once and stepped back. The seated figure's arm fell stiffly back to its side. But it was, without question, alive.

"You felt the pulse? Very strong, yes? Exceptionally fine muscle tone, also, a result of tensions and counter tensions within. Dead, as you said, sir, and yet technically alive—and, at present therapeutic appropriation levels, likely to remain for fifty, sixty years of the state the costly, custodial ward." The good Doctor nodded in serious reflection. Man, he had made his point that time; nothing but passes on the dice for him today.

"Oh?" Representative Hillyer spoke up thoughtfully. "Two years like that, you say? Poor fellow. What happened to him? Some ghastly experience, a horrible personal tragedy?"

"Another interesting point. According to our case history records, nothing. The mother died, yes, but nothing out of the way there and this was some time before. Adjustment, apparently, had been difficult but successful. And then, abruptly, in the situation of no visible stress—click, like turn of switch. The organism, the mental organism, has refused life and turned away, resolutely, face to blank wall. Frozen, the complete catatonic state. Hopeless—with present facilities, that is. Of course with more modern equipment, more funds at the disposal, even the case such as this, who could say . . . ?"

"Hmph!" Rep. Crabtree. But he was impressed. "As well be dead as like that."

"It is terrible thing, gentlemen, yes? Our responsibility to this fellow human being, it has been properly discharged? All that we may do, has it been done?"

Rep. Hillyer thought about it a moment. "How much more money could cure him? Could anything cure him?"

No word seemed exactly safe. Dr. Halliwell shrugged, expressively non-committal.

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"Well then, Doctor. Here he is. We have done what we can within reason. Within reason, Doctor. But a line must be drawn; arbitrarily, if you will, but it must be drawn. We cannot, can we, bleed endlessly for all suffering humanity? First we must live ourselves or life ceases. Second, we should be fair as we see it; kind within reason. We can be held responsible no further than that." Undoubtedly a very poor bet for re-election, Representative Hillyer.

DR. HALLIWELL paused a moment only, to collect mentally several ringing passages of rebuttal from some of his more effective speeches on Service.

Into the interval of silence a hoarse, rusty sounding voice spoke. "By God," it said, in a tone of revelation, "I think that's right. In fact that has got to be right. It's not my fault, not my responsibility, what happens to them. I've got to live."

The committee members exchanged looks of suspicious surprise. Dr. Halliwell, had no one to exchange with and wore a look of total astonishment, chagrin and annoyance. It might be all very well for this living corpse to move back into the world. There were plenty of patients and if one chose to be cured, fine—but not like that, off-hand, casually, in response to some stupid, chance remark instead of to fine, expensive treatment. He waved a curtly commanding signal to an attendant as the patient, George Dibbit, incredibly lifted himself to shaky feet and looked about with every indication of intelligent interest.

"Ah—gentlemen," said Dr. Halliwell, "I am afraid already too much of your valuable time I have wasted in inspection of this so minor sector of our great institution. Shall we—?"

"No wait, wait just a suffering minute here, Halliwell," yapped Rep. Crabtree, "I think the committee might like to ask this peculiar patient some questions."

"Ah well, gentlemen, as you wish, of course. It is only that with such a case . . . when we see the sudden turn from total inactivity, there may come the sudden total activity. At any moment now . . ."

"He might get violent? Uh. Well Doctor, like you say, maybe we've wasted enough time already hanging around here. Come on."

The committee moved on. The burly, white coated attendant was at George's side. "So," he said, a growl of pleased menace, "you finally decided to come out of it, did you? And maybe you got it in mind to make some trouble for old Kegan, have ya?"

"Oh no," said George, "no sir, indeed I hadn't thought of any-

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thing like that at all. Please, believe me, I wouldn't . . ."

"Awright, awright; so shut the yap awready before I decide to show you some slapping up exercises you never got yet. You can walk for yourself now? Good. Do it, Mac. Your suite is ready. Move out now."

George moved on the word. But Kegan caught his arm just the same, in a powerful, twisting grip. It was an effort not to cry out, but George made it.

Two years of rigid bodily inactivity didn't mean his whole mind had been still and dead. The essential self of George Dibbit, the 'I' had willed itself into immobility. But his senses had observed and other sections of his mind had recorded. The subconscious had noted, recognized, weighed, considered and filed data. Now that the ego had been triggered back into life, all this material was there, ready for use. He knew exactly where he was and how and why. He knew who his guard was, too. Old Kegan was a happy man, in his way, and fortunate in his vocation of asylum guard. It dovetailed so nicely with his avocation, which was petty sadism.

There was Kegan and there was George Dibbit. They had followed converging lines of personal history to that moment. And at that moment the mind of George Dibbit flashed in review a substantial infinity of possible actions leading to an infinite number of possible future lines and directions, many similar, some at wide variance. Which act and line should he, George Dibbig select? He shrugged imperceptibly and moved on toward his cell. Kegan held to his left arm and twisted. There were so many things George might have done—screamed, kicked, fought, cried—any number of variations. But what he did was move quietly and uncomplainingly along. Not a cry. Kegan twisted harder and was disappointed. George bit his lip.

"That man Hillyer was right," he told himself. "It isn't my responsibility to bleed for everyone. I must live and do what in reason is right for me. Kegan is his own look-out; and if he moves in a certain direction when he leaves me—well, it's his movement, not mine. And," a small after thought of rationalization added, "a man as mean as that ought to die anyway. That grip of his is murder."

DOWN a short stretch of hall George's arm was freed and he was locked in his small, square room with the small, barred window in the door. After a while some nurse or other would look in on him. In the meantime he sat on the mattress on the floor and reviewed an infinity of lines

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to varied futures, confining himself as rigidly as possible to his own possibilities. The others—not his responsibility. And the line now for him, certainly, was one which would lead him out of this place.

An hour later when Nurse Rosecranz came, he firmly declined a little snack, to be given intravenously. "Believe me," he insisted, "I can eat now."

"Well, I don't know . . . Your chart still says . . ."

"Kind of a pity about what happened to Kegan, isn't it, Miss Rosecranz?"

"Nothing bad that happened to Kegan would be a pity. What happened to him?"

"Kegan was going across the road to the 'campus' to pick up some red ants to spread around women's security. Kegan was always trying, wasn't he? Even if he wasn't very imaginative."

"Wasn't?"

"He's gone now. Stepped off the high curb out front there; his heel came down in some oil; slipped. Bang. Down he went, head, smack, on the curb. Cracked his thick skull—not like an egg, I guess; more like a walnut."

"Hmph. And when do you suppose all this happened?"

"About a minute and a half ago."

"Man, you are a real nu . . . oops!"

"Please, Miss Rosecranz. Not any more, I'm not. Tell Dr. Halliwell I want to see him, will you?"

"Ha!" She left.

In something under half an hour she was back. "Where did you hear about Kegan? You couldn't possibly, you know. It happened right while I was standing here talking to you."

"But I was right, wasn't I? Did you tell Dr. Halliwell I want to see him?"

"Of course not. You know he wouldn't."

"On the contrary, I know that if you go to Dr. Halliwell's office and mention that I wish to see him about Louisville in 1946, he will see me."

"Nonsense."

"And if you do that for me, Miss Rosecranz, and if you then go and take a nice, warm, relaxing bath with bath salts, dress in that new, low-cut rose taffeta of yours, wear that perfume you never quite dared try and, at five-thirty walk slowly down the hall toward the front entrance—Dr. Devvers will happen along and insist on taking you out to dinner. Later, he will make you a very appealing proposition."

"But—but he never . . ."

"But tonight he will . . . if you do as I say. And, if you hold out on the proposition, he'll make a proposal of it."

"How could you possibly know all that?"

"I knew about Kegan, didn't

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I? And Dr. Halliwell will see me. Take a chance, Miss Rosecranz. What have you got to lose?" Of course there were a number of other probability lines for her that could lead to a reasonably happy marriage to Benny Buszto, owner of Buzz's Garage. But that was a jumble, too far ahead to see clearly and if Dr. Devvers did already have a wife in Spokane—the hell with that. What was right for George Dibbit was that he see Dr. Halliwell, the old quack, and get out of here. Nurse Rosecranz was her own responsibility. A tourniquet for Rosecranz. He, damnit, was finished bleeding for all wounds.

AT FOUR p.m., George Dibbit was called in for a completely out of routine interview with Dr. Halliwell. He looked firmly straight ahead as Nurse Rosecranz, smiling girlishly over her prospective date, ushered him into the Doctor's study.

"Ah, George old boy," said Dr. Halliwell, rising from his easy chair by the fireplace, "and how are we this evening?"

"Fine, Doctor. Quite well now, in fact, and ready to leave here tomorrow."

Nurse Rosecranz closed the door behind her.

"Feet first, Dibbit?" inquired Dr. Halliwell in quite a different tone. "What in hell do you know about Louisville in 1946?"

"Actually nothing much, Doctor, now."

The Doctor started to reach for the row of buzzer buttons on the desk at his right.

"Except that it is clear to me, Doctor, that mention of the words 'Louisville,' 'abortion racket,' 'Mary Skinner' and 'forged credentials' will serve to get me your full attention."

The Doctor, looking quite suddenly pale, sank back into his chair and gave George Dibbit his full attention. "You couldn't know," he whispered, "you couldn't possibly know about all that."

"Of course I don't," said George cheerfully, "and, assuming that things develop as I am sure they will and you arrange for my full discharge from this crummy asylum tomorrow, it will not become necessary or even possible for me—or anyone else—ever to know much of anything about all that."

"Dibbit," said Dr. Halliwell, grimly, "you are a soft shelled nut on a shaky tree . . . but you've got hold of something. What in hell is it?"

"May I sit down, Doctor?" George sat in the straight arm chair facing Dr. Halliwell. "Now I see I must explain to you. It is all right here in my mind, Doctor."

The Doctor looked again at the buttons on his desk.

"Including the abortion racket

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bit and Louisville." The Doctor looked back at George. "The thing is this," George went on. "At any given moment for anyone, there is an infinity of different courses open. Right now there are millions of alternative possibilities for me, things I could say or do. And, Doctor, I can see all of them and the consequences of each."

"What nonsense!"

"And that, Doctor, is how I knew that all the words I might have voiced, the references to forged credentials, Louisville, Mary Skinner and abortion would be of particular significance to you and would persuade you to listen to me—as you are."

That much was undeniable. What did this nut actually have? Might as well go along and try to find out, Dr. Halliwell decided. "When did this-ah-remarkable talent come to you, Dibbit? Just today?"

"Oh no, Doctor. That is what brought me here."

"Why? Seems to me a thing like that could be rather-ah-profitable."

George smiled. "And it can. My trouble was that, up until today, I didn't know how to apply it reasonably. When the thing first happened, two years ago, it threw me flat. Hasn't it ever bothered you, Doctor, the question of what if? What if you were to do this? Or that?"

The Doctor nodded. He was doing well enough. That "what if" question?—barring a few unlucky miscalculations back there in Louisville, he generally managed to come up with pretty well calculated answers. Even Louisville—at least he'd gotten out in time, with credentials.

WELL, Doctor, it was a question that nearly drove me mad. What if? 'What if I do this?' I used to wonder. 'Or what if I do that instead?' But I could never know, never be sure. What result would any action of mine bring? If I only knew, it seemed to me, then I could decide what to do, act with a clear conscience. I wondered, worried myself sick. And then came that evening two years ago. 'What if?' I wondered. And all at once I knew what each course I might take would bring. It drove me mad. Right, Doctor? At least it put me in the state I was in for the past two years. Frozen. A distorted sense of responsibility, that was the thing. You, Doctor, would have known better. But when I suddenly saw the possibilities of pain, tragedy even, that the most inconsequential act of mine might bring to others, I couldn't stand it. I froze. Even freezing, of course, had its spread of consequences. But, at least, it seemed to reduce my responsibility to a minimum."

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"And now? You just don't give a damn?"

"If I cut myself, Doctor, would you bleed? There has got to be a line and I have drawn one. But you still don't quite believe me, do you Doctor?"

Dr. Halliwell shrugged. Of course it wasn't believable. But . . . ?

"So now I see I'll have to give you a little demonstration. If I do thus and so, in this situation, then you inevitably must . . . well. We *will* see. Mind if I take a piece of paper and pencil from your desk? Of course you don't mind. All right. I'll jot down a few notes. Now, Doctor, if you will just do something, any simple series of little actions—anything that might come to your mind, things you know I couldn't possibly have guessed." George folded the sheet of paper he had written on and handed it to the Doctor. "What you are about to do is written down here."

Dr. Halliwell took the piece of paper and tucked it in his pocket. He could always go along with a gag if it didn't cost anything. If this disproved a point, then he could get rid of this nut. What if it didn't? Dr. Halliwell was no worrier. There was always some out.

The dignified Doctor thought a second. Then he got up from his chair and sat on the floor. He took off his left shoe, wiggled long, finger-like toes vigorously, scratched the bottom of the foot with his right hand and, smiling thinly, slipped the shoe back on. Then, he got back to his chair, scratched at his nose with his left hand and finally pulled the piece of paper from his pocket.

The paper read, "Sit on floor, take off shoe, left. Wiggle toes. Scratch foot, right hand. Note: Hole in heel of sock. Put shoe back on. Back in chair. Scratch nose. Read paper. Take shoe off again."

Dr. Halliwell tried to stop himself but couldn't. Irresistibly, he had to take the left shoe back off and look. There was a hole in the heel of the sock. For an instant, he questioned his own sanity. But he hadn't bounced back up from . . . well, from whatever it might have been that he was in back in Louisville to his present position of modest eminence without being adaptable, quick thinking and quite, quite sure of his own mind and rightness. If this Dibbit psycho actually did have some faculty of foreseeing and effectively directing his own future and, incidentally, that of others in contact with him . . . well. First, it would certainly be wise not to antagonize him. Second, if there really was anything in the proposition . . . there certainly ought to be something in it for Dr. Halliwell.

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"Ah yes. Hum. Well now. Mr. Dibbit. You want me to secure release tomorrow? It would be stretching regulations a good bit to arrange such a thing."

"I have a clear conviction that the elastic regulation is not a new thing to you, Doctor."

"Ah? It could be managed, I suppose. Of course, before I agree to this, you must know that I am going to ask your assurance that you-ah-entertain only the best of good wishes for me personally? That you guarantee not, through some simple act of yours, to arrange anything unpleasant?"

"You have my promise." He, George Dibbit, would neither bleed—nor stab. "And now, to save time, Doctor, suppose I give you some of the answers I see you feel you must have without bothering to have you voice the questions."

"That would be interesting."

"Yes, seeing all of the possible lines into the future is very confusing. It was horribly jumbled and mixed up at first. Now I begin to find that I can pick a line, an aim for myself and concentrate on that and it is easier. All of the others are there, I know what they are, but I keep them in the background. I can only see these lines of consequence for a short period ahead now. Then it fogs up. But the extent is increasing with practice. Two years ago it was only an hour; now I can visualize a day or more. No, I'm not going to tell you anything about your future. I'm not looking at it. I don't care —one way or the other. Why should I? No, I am not going to tell anyone else about this faculty of mine. I am just going to use it to get along reasonably myself. I won't try to hurt anyone—and that's the end of my responsibility, understand? And why, Doctor, are you going to insist that I promise to name you a major beneficiary in my will?"

THE Doctor started. It was a thought all right, now he thought about it. "Ah well, Mr. Dibbit. I can't control the future, or look into it; you know that. The best I can do is a simple little hunch."

"You think I might choose to end my own life?"

"An absurd thought, isn't it Mr. Dibbit? But naturally, even with your gift, you can't live forever."

George looked mildly disturbed. He hadn't thought much about that, although he would.

"And, of course, you will become very, very rich. It will be a comfort to me, shall we say, to know that my heirs will be so well provided for."

"Hmph." Such deep family devotion on the part of Dr. Halliwell, a bachelor, seemed unlikely.

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"Well . . . since you are going to be so insistent, I don't suppose it really matters to me. All right. I agree."

Dr. Halliwell, rising, smiled and said aloud, "Fine. Tomorrow you re-enter the world to make it yours, Mr. Dibbit. It is a wonderful gift you have. You are much to be envied." And said to himself, "But not by me. It is a wonderful gift, yes; but its ultimate practicality, I question."

So they said good night. The good Dr. Halliwell stayed for a bit in his study, doctoring papers, fixing up the retroactive records and such that would take care of George Dibbit's release the following day. George went back to his tiny world of four walls and a mattress for the last time. He didn't mind. He had, as they say, a few things to think through.

The next morning George ate a hearty breakfast of—no, not the usual mush—fruit, waffles, two fresh eggs, sunny, and coffee, all from Dr. Halliwell's own kitchen, served by a radiant Nurse Rosecranz. George thanked her. Her gratitude was just a little embarrassing but . . . George looked the other way, an essential new skill, and ate with good appetite.

Afterward, he waited. Naturally, he knew there were clearances to be cleared, that it would take a little time. Naturally, he knew that he would leave the hospital at exactly 11:55. Still, the waiting did make him just the tiniest bit nervous; he did develop the merest touch of heartburn.

HE left exactly on the minute, in Dr. Halliwell's big, black car, to ride the two miles to the railroad station over at Kinville. He got out at the station—George Dibbit, free man of clear decision; George Dibbit, with a railroad ticket to the city and five dollars in the side pocket of the same dark suit, a touch snug now, with the black arm-band he had, anxiously, decided to wear to work that morning over two years before. He was the least bit nervous, a touch impatient. But still, he watched two trains through the station before he boarded the 5:10. Why? Because he figured the $200 would come in handy, of course.

On the train, no trouble, he found his way directly to the club car.

A lurch of the train; he stumbled. Two sharp-eyed men eyed him sharply. He did look a type, almost too gullible, almost too perfect to be true. "Poker?" he answered blandly, a minute or two later, "No, I've never played it; but I'd like to learn."

He didn't have to learn. It—it was incredible, the blind, dumb luck of the jerk, and with the

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cards stacked, how could he possibly . . . But George made the city with $200 in pocket. The two sharp-eyed, red-faced men eyed each other sharply. They would quarrel viciously. But . . . not George's responsibility.

From the station, George went to the best hotel, the Grande. He moved into the best room. No, taking the honeymoon suite solo didn't bother him. He knew company would be coming. He ordered the best dinner, room service; he was tired, he had some thinking to do. ". . . and-uh-boy," he told the waiter, "bring me a pack of soda-mints, too, will you?"

So he got soda mints after dinner, very soothing to the nervous stomach, and tipped the waiter a five and if the waiter bought a bottle with it, got drunk, and . . . that was his look out, not George Dibbit's. George ate, enjoyed a bottle of good wine and his soda mints and slept passably well enough. His mind was very clear. He could see a good—a wonderful—two weeks ahead now, before the fog closed in.

THE next day at exactly 10:30 a.m., just as the fluffy, doll-cute little blonde receptionist got back from her coffee break, he walked into the outer office of Burner and Barnes, Attorneys. George smiled with a little, wistful twist and asked to see either of the partners. The doll looked him over. He looked shabby. Cute too, in a funny sort of way, that little smile of his but . . . she had her orders.

"I'm sorry, Mr.—uh—Dibble, but Mr. Barnes is out of town and Mr. Burner positively can't see anyone without an appointment."

"Oh? Well . . . let's see, this is Thursday. Perhaps you could get me an appointment with him for day after tomorrow, up at Lake Winago after you and he have gotten settled in and . . ."

"You . . . you—you—you!"

But he smiled at her with such warm, sympathetic understanding for a poor girl's problems that she couldn't really be mad at him, although how he could possibly have known . . . well, let Mr. Burner worry about that.

"If you will wait just a minute," she smiled, blushed charmingly, a rare talent, "I'll check with Mr. Burner and I'm just practically sure he'll be able to squeeze you in."

Mr. Burner was able to squeeze George in; but not out.

"Dibbit?" said Mr. Burner as soon as George had managed to switch the subject from Lake Winago, "Dibbit? A Dibbit estate? Hum. Oh—oh yes. But Dr. Halliwell assured me personally . . . uh-well. It was only some

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fifteen thousand or so, Mr. Dibbit, your mother was never a wealthy woman. And, I'm sure you will understand, unfortunate investments, even the most careful management cannot always . . ."

"But it can sometimes, eh?" George interrupted, "especially if it's careful enough, right? I have in mind, particularly, the City Rapid Transit and those old, supposedly defaulted West Side Horse Car Company bonds that were redeemed, and Mr. Barnes' nephew on the Utilities Commission. Careful management . . ."

"Ah . . . please, Mr. Dibbit . . ."

"Please, Mr. Burner. Don't give that elevator shaft another thought. Accidents are dreadfully poor management."

"Yes Mr. Dibbit. Now, back to that Dibbit estate. Fifteen thousand did I say? Of course. And I am confident that a check of our records will show that the estate has not diminished; very possibly some appreciation even, a thousand . . . two—"

"Two," said George, "I wouldn't want to be unreasonable, or hurt anyone."

No indeed he wouldn't; or do anything dishonest, either. George Dibbit was a man with a very strong sense of responsibility—within reason, that is. There was, of course, his investment in the old Hannheim Company Brewery and the business of that personal tax loss carryover that the District Collector took such an interest in. "Damned if I'm quite sure yet whether that slippery young man found a new loophole or made one. But if he ever slips . . ."

But how could George Dibbit slip? He knew all the answers. They came to him. And, of course, the court found for him all the way in all of the tax cases.

The money rolled in and piled up. Before the first year was out, Burner and Barnes—Buck Burner was very understanding about George and Flo, the little blonde receptionist—dropped all their other business, even City Transit, to handle the unpublicized but burgeoning Dibbit empire. A fine business.

As Buck Burner said, "Georgie, my boy, that amazing business instinct of yours and my legal talent, let me tell you . . ."

"No, let me tell you," George was developing rapidly in confidence and irritability (that nervous stomach) "Just keep track of the money—and your mouth shut. Me. I know what I need to know and that is enough. And I don't need you to tell me anything else. What I don't know . . ."

"—won't hurt you. Right?" Buck Burner laughed jovially and patted George's back with

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warm affection. George winced a touch and moved away.

Of course poor old Buck Burner died of a stroke in late March, at Lake Winago, off season, certainly no fault of George's, but Henry Barnes' nephew came into the firm and carried on well enough.

A TIRESOME thing, money, after a certain point, George Dibbit thought. He thought about a lot of things—and farther and farther ahead. The money, after the first few months, took very little of his attention. He made the necessary decisions. The money piled up and he was generous with it. What more could anyone reasonably ask of him?

Well, yes, girls; some of them thought of something further to ask, such as, for instance, about marriage. And George thought about it, too. He thought about it a lot—and over a long period of time. Well, George Dibbitt was no wolf at heart. Of course, on the outside, with all that money, plus that peculiar appeal he seemed to have—the timely word, the touching gesture, something—sure, he had girls. And some of them wanted to marry him, George Dibbit, not just the money. So what if he married one? What if? If . . . he didn't tell her what he knew, she would know he was holding something back and, before long, she would hate him. If he did tell her, she would hate him before he managed to get his mouth shut after explaining it. He would be responsible for . . . no, not that.

So young George Dibbit was a young financial wizard and an international playboy. Not a bad life. Irresponsible? A matter of opinion. No, in George's. Hell, he never played rough. A year. Two. Two and a half.

Mr. Dibbit, just back from abroad, was spending an early evening in his full floor suite in the Grande. It was his regular, nightly quiet hour. He wore a dressing gown and sat in an easy chair, a tray, a drink—a couple of packs of soda mints—beside him. He sipped and popped a mint in his mouth; and another.

A door opened. "George?" called the girl, a tall, smooth-curved red-head, "Georgie-pie," a very sweet talking girl for a red-head, "when are we . . ."

"Shut up," said George dully, "I've told you and told you, don't yell at me when I am trying to think. What do I have to . . . uh, well, look, hon. Why don't you just go downstairs and wait for me in the lobby."

"But . . ."

"That young assistant manager with the cute mustache is just going off duty. If I'm not there in twenty minutes, don't wait for me."

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She went without protest.

George took another mint. He hadn't aged much, apparently. He didn't look a bit old. Just sick. His face was grey. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. His hands trembled and he gritted his teeth, every nerve drawn tense. "What if . . . ?"

But no, damnit, no; no use. He could look and he could look, but he had seen it all now, all there was. He was thirty-four years old. The maximum, now he knew since that last, long, stubbornly misted over stretch of future possibility had cleared tonight, was another 89 years. Long enough? No, of course it wasn't, not when he knew. And besides, such a miserable death, the last fifteen years as a drooling, senile idiot. The thought was intolerable. No, not that. But what then? Take that seventy year option and the assassin's bullet in the back? How could he stand waiting for that? If he could only put it out of his mind . . . but no, not the frontal lobotomy, no more nerves, no more worry, but the price, a mindless drift to skid row, the cirrhosis, agonizing, he could almost feel it. No.

But—that was the way it went. There were millions of roads, an infinity of alternate possible roads stretching before him—and each one ended in death.

How could he live with that knowledge? How could he go on and on, waiting, knowing all the time the exact hour, day, minute and the manner of his death. No; 89 years, 70 years—any years, no. He couldn't. He wouldn't stand months of suspense. He wouldn't, by God, stand another . . . wait. The thought of Dr. Halliwell, smiling, smoothly confident, back there at the State Hospital crossed his mind. Should he look? No. He couldn't see anything there, it didn't connect closely enough with his own paths any more. But—George smiled—at least he could write the Doctor a letter. He could wait long enough to do that.

He did.

THE death of George Dibbit, young man with everything in the world to live for, all that money, and from an overdose of sleeping pills at that, was a news wonder. "Why?" the newspapers wondered in headlines. Everybody wondered. "Why?"

Everybody wondered, that is, except Dr. Halliwell, the controversial, investigation plagued director of the State Hospital.

Dr. Halliwell, when he heard the news on the radio in his office, smiled and nodded to himself. "I thought so—and none too soon either, since that blasted Nurse Rosecranz had to go and shoot her husband, Dr. Devvers,

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and then start talking, talking, talking." Well, the Dibbit money would take care of things.

But then, the Dibbit letter came first, special delivery, that same evening. It was George Dibbit's last word.

Dr. Halliwell, in his study, slit open the envelope after a good deal of careful thought. He had considered burning it. But he was always a curious man.

"Dear Dr. Halliwell," it said, "You win. You didn't think I could take it once I knew clear to the end. Right? And right. I can't. Can't take the money either, can I? So it goes to you. Everything you have always wanted. You are rich, Dr. Halliwell, and I, George Dibbit, am dead. Your future is clear, isn't it? Or is it?"

Dr. Halliwell snorted; and read on.

"You know that I must know the answer, don't you? And when you get my money, that is my doing, isn't it? How much you get, how you get it . . . and what happens after you get it. In other words, Doctor, it looks as though your death will be on my time, doesn't it? It will be my doing and my responsibility. All right. I don't mind. You bet that my temperament wouldn't be able to stand the strain of waiting out a certainty. I wonder if you, Doctor, even for all that money, can stand waiting out the uncertainty—never knowing just when and how I may have decided to kill you.

"What do you say to that, Dr. Halliwell?" The letter ended.

"Nonsense," said the Doctor to it, firmly, "arrant nonsense."

But an hour later, very quietly, Dr. Halliwell left his comfortable quarters at the State Hospital. He carried a suitcase. He was travelling light, fast and far.

The money, all that George Dibbit left? There is a Church of the Advent of Everlasting Night, a peculiar sect, one that is making book on the end of the world on March 18, 1968. Since Dr. Halliwell disappeared and never did file claim, by the Dibbit will the whole fortune went to the "Nighters," as they are called, "where," as George's will remarked, "it will do the most good."

And what did he mean by that?

Who knows? Who wants to?

THE END

When answering advertisements be sure to say you saw it in

FANTASTIC

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According to you...

Dear Mr. Lobsenz:

I had never taken in hand a copy of this newsstand one-in-many. My interest in biblical literature attracted me accidently to your October issue featuring an article "Deluge II." That however was not what turned out to capture me. Actually "Deluge II" was read with declining interest. But your editorial really hit home with me.

As a professor in French Contemporary Literature I have become extremely sensitive to the trends of thought in works of contemporary authors. Science fiction undoubtedly is an important sector where metaphysical implications are at the very core of all that is written. The editorial signed N.L. by which I gathered it might have come from your own pen commented on the preceding description of a "cyborg" (man-machine): "The picture may well fascinate science-fictioneers or fantasy enthusiasts. On more sober thought, it sickens. These cyborgs would not be as the scientists envision, "super-human" beings. They would be sub-human. The individual would become a mere component of an automatized system—a tiny cog in a machine incomparably imaginative but incomparably fatal to everything we respect".

May I be permitted to applaud most heartily to this.

And may I expose briefly to you why I do. I know a great many cultured minds and specialists in literature who would have nothing to do with science-fiction. Even I personally am very choosy about what I do permit myself to read.

I think maybe we should take a second look at the part science-fiction writers are playing in our

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world of today. In a nutshell, they are the poets of science. One need not enlarge on the fact that poets are indispensable to the healthy development and progress of literature and thought. Poets are magi, endowed with keen minds peering into the future, foreseeing events and consequences of things as they are being made today. They actually thus probe into the possible outcome of blind men's actions.

Science has never permeated the everyday life of man as in this century. Science has never come up with so astounding results. Science has never appeared the true reorganizer of man's life as it does today. Yet science to many thinkers, and the greatest, is truly a blind force. Men must guide it. And this task can best be left to those thinkers and philosophers whose part will be above all to make men aware of the blindness of this force they have unleashed.

But there is still need for the poet of science, and I think he is the science-fiction writer. He projects science into the future. He foresees what the things being made today will bear as consequences tomorrow. He unveils the possible product of a blind material creator. He fetches beyond the overpowering forces of men's science today the aim he will realize tomorrow he should have started with in the first place. Man remains as always: a learner by experience. There is an originator of experience which we must look upon with respect: that is the creative mind turned to the future. It makes it possible to experience the future in such a way that such experience is as profitable as in reality, yet no more detrimental to man than a mere nightmare from which it is good to wake unhurt.

I say our hats off to the poets of the scientific world.

Leo A. Brodeur.
Laurentian University
Sudbury, Ont.

o *If writers are, as you put it, the poets of science; and if "poets are magi," perhaps what the world most needs today is a new, spiritually revitalizing "Gift of the Magi."*

Dear Editor:

Please don't look for a lengthy *critique* on the Quality of each and every facet of your magazine —suffice it to say I find it 80% enjoyable 90% of the time— hence my 35¢ on the drugstore counter when I find myself with an hour or two for some enjoyable relaxation.

However, your letter column in the October issue made me decide to write this letter; in answer. . . .

1, please don't increase it's size—

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I think the only purpose a letter column is good for is to re-assure us readers you haven't lost contact with us.

2. don't decrease the size of type used in it—that would be the first step towards an editorial hash which is present in far too many magazines today.

3. no "AN LAB" please. What useful purpose would it serve—except to inflate a few egotists when the ratings come out the same as theirs—probably because they stuffed the ballot box.

No—I'd rather see you devote every possible inch of space to real literature—isn't that the reason the magazine is printed?

R. Martinkivi
Portland, Org.

● *Yes.*

COMING NEXT MONTH

A triple-threat issue—that's the description for the March FANTASTIC

Threat 1: **Jack Sharkey,** with a rollicking tale of a robot that could not be destroyed as it binged its way across the U.S.: *Robotum Delenda Est!*

Threat 2: One of **Murray Leinster's** greatest stories is the Fantasy Classic for the month: *The Darkness on Fifth Ave.*

Threat 3 (and 4, really): Avram Davidson and Ward Moore's newest, most imaginative novel —*Joyleg*—the story of a man who did not know what time it was.

All this, plus short stories and the usual departments, in the February FANTASTIC, at your newsstand February 20.

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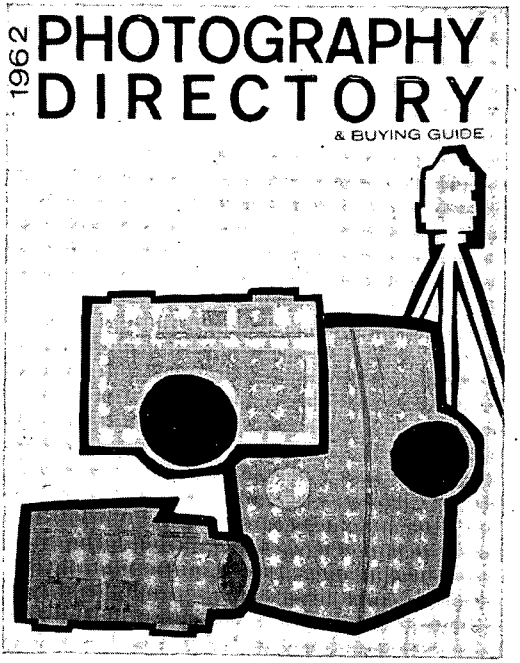

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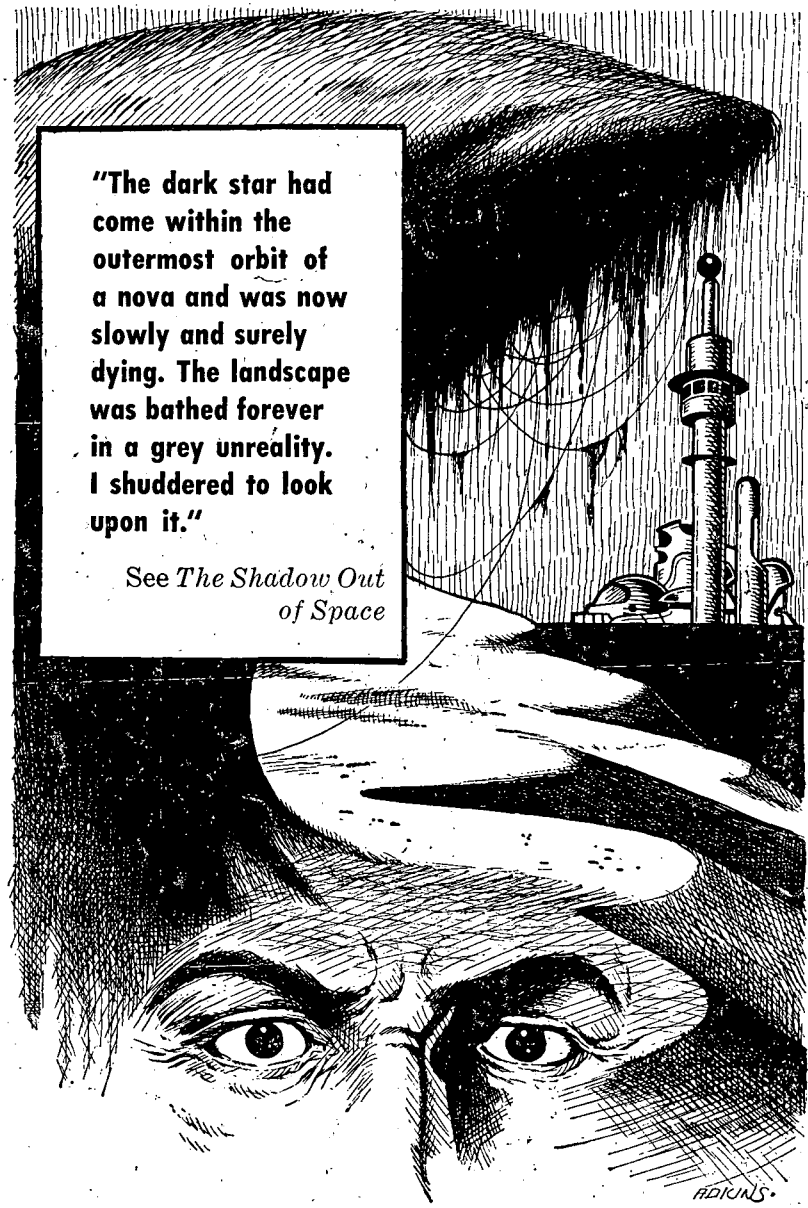
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